



## How I Write

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**A**LTHOUGH I HAVE MY HABITS, I try not to fetishise the writing process, environment or equipment too much because, in a business in which luck plays so large a part, it is easy to become superstitious. I once became rather attached to a particular fountain pen – a sponsor’s freebie for being on a prize shortlist – and convinced myself that nothing worthwhile could be written without it. Then I lost it. Since then I have curbed my dependence on working rituals. One of the chief advantages of writing as a job is that it is almost uniquely flexible, can be done anywhere at any time, so it seems foolish to limit yourself by the conviction that you can only properly concentrate in one room, with its uniquely inspiring furnishings or view.

As a young mother, I would take the baby out for a drive for as long as it took to get her to sleep and then slew into the side of the road wherever I happened to be and start writing for that precious interval – no more than an hour – before her eyes snapped open and the wailing started again. When working as an invigilator of public exams, I would gaze around the hall of silent candidates in a kind of reverie, imagining scenes from my latest novel-in-progress and composing lines of dialogue in my head. Ideas always seemed to flow more freely when there was no opportunity to write them down.

My current place of work is the small room which functions as the household office for what used to be called ‘paperwork’ — and much else besides. As well as bookshelves, desk, computer, stationery and filing



cabinets, I see that it also contains fishing rods, camping chairs, musical instruments and a bag of quick-setting mortar. I prefer to write my first draft in longhand on the sort of cheap lined paper that can be bought anywhere and then type the whole thing up, editing as I go. There is something about the speed and flow of handwriting that is sympathetic to the rhythm of my thoughts, whereas I associate typing on a keyboard with less creative pursuits — online tax forms, angry emails to my broadband provider, the retrieval of forgotten passwords and so on.

I have always been a slow and laborious worker, writing and rewriting a page, ironing out any problems until I am satisfied before moving on. This means I seldom write more than 600 words in a day and it may take three years to produce a novel, but it also means that my first version is almost my last. Rewrites are done with a fine brush not a wrecking ball. The idea of ‘dashing off’ a first draft, leaving plot holes and inconsistencies and mangled chronology to be tackled later seems to work fine for many writers but it fills me with horror.

The ‘one good page’ method is also a defence against the feeling of paralysis that can strike when you contemplate the blank sheet of paper. ‘I have to write a good page’ is a much less intimidating prospect than ‘I have to write a book.’