



## Writers and Deadlines

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**W**RITER DOUGLAS ADAMS famously wrote in one of his *Dirk Gently* novels 'I love deadlines. I like the whooshing sound they make as they fly by'. However playful its intention, this quote goes against all my natural instincts. A deadline is usually set for a reason, and missing that deadline is probably going to be an annoyance to the person who set it. Give me a deadline and I'll make it.

Perhaps a writer should decide early on in their career whether they're going to observe deadlines or ignore them, and advertise that fact to those who might involve them in some literary endeavour. We tolerate the disorganised genius who can never submit their work on time because their work is worth the wait. Most of us are literary mortals, however, and we aren't afforded the luxury of being unreliable.

The observance of the deadline among a group of poets contributing commissioned work to a project or an anthology can be mapped out like a graph. At the left edge of the distribution curve is a small spike consisting of what the poet Jo Bell once called 'the hurtlers' — those who submit their fully formed work almost as soon as the starting pistol is fired. The curve rises to the middle where the majority of poets submit, within the deadline, plateauing right up to a sharp spike just before the deadline, after which there is a rapid tailing off, with just a few poets left who have yet to submit. So, you contact them and ask how they're getting on. Some ask for more time — 'it's *nearly* there'. Some have forgotten they agreed to participate but will write something by the end of the week.



And then there are those who say they have tried but reluctantly they are now unable to complete the commission. Frustratingly, this has probably denied another poet a place in the project, which is a shame.

A few months ago I was asked by the Cultural Service Department of my local authority to write a poem to be used in a mental health project. They would pay a decent amount of money for the finished poem. But they wanted it within two weeks, and would that be a problem? I suspected that a lot of my poet friends would have politely declined at that point — two weeks would be nowhere near long enough for them to do the commission justice. I accepted the commission, along with its deadline, worked long into the night on the poem (with the help of a couple of critical readers whom I knew would get back to me quickly with suggestions), and delivered it before the deadline. I'm mindful that if this had been a credit card bill and not a poetry commission, late payment would have affected my credit rating or even got me blacklisted. And a poet of meagre means can't afford to be blacklisted. It wasn't the best poem I could have written, but it *was* the best poem I could have written in two weeks.

And in case you're wondering — I finished writing the script for this talk about two minutes before the tape started running. Don't tell anyone.