



Writers and Deadlines

Katherine Stansfield

THERE WAS A TIME in my life when I regularly said, ‘I don’t work well under pressure. Deadlines are awful things!’

I realise now, with hindsight, that when I gave such cries against deadlines, I hadn’t really experienced any. Well, that’s not quite true. At university we had assignment deadlines, but they tended to be manageable, so why was I so keen to tell people that I hated them? I think I must have become caught in the dangerous waters of the truism. It is a truism that deadlines are stressful. Writers, in particular, are terrible for perpetuating this idea: we are often to be found bemoaning our deadlines to one another in a strange kind of one-upmanship of awfulness.

When I received the publishing contract for my first novel, it included a deadline by which I had to submit the completed manuscript. I wrote the date on a separate piece of paper and kept it next to my computer as I worked, always in my eyeline. Rather than being made anxious by the deadline, I found it made me quite cheerful. Prior to getting a publishing contract, years of working on that book without any hope it would see the light of day meant it lacked any discernible sense of closure. How would I know when it was finished, or when to give up? But once I had the contract, I had a date when I would hand the book to someone else, and that was a gift. I found I loved having a deadline. It made me more focused and motivated, and that has continued ever since. Now, if I’m commissioned to do something and I’m not given a deadline, I request one.



Like many writers, I supplement my writing income with teaching and freelance work. This means that at any one time I am employed by, or commissioned by, a number of different organisations, none of whom care one jot about how the deadlines they give me will interact with those set by others. It's my job, and mine alone, to work out how to manage my time to meet them. I do this in a very low-tech way which is really just an extension of what I did with that first publishing deadline.

I write all my existing deadlines on an A4 page, in chronological order with the soonest first. Right now, my soonest deadline is three days' time (to submit a new module outline for the Lifelong Learning department in which I teach). The deadline furthest away is in five months, and that's a biggie: deliver a new novel. I will cross off and add to this list as I meet some deadlines and gain new ones. When the paper becomes messy, I write it out afresh and begin all over again.

I find that an approaching deadline is a bit like a tennis ball coming at me over the net. It starts off in slow motion, but as it gets closer it speeds up. I keep it in sight and adjust my feet, adjust my racket, to meet it. When I hit it, I experience immense satisfaction. I allow myself a moment to appreciate it disappearing from my life, and then I'm back in position, watching the next ball approach.