



THE PROCRASTINATION STATION

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“When I’m supposed to be writing I clean my apartment, take my clothes to the laundry, get organized, make lists, do the dishes. I would never do a dish unless I had to write.”

- Fran Lebowitz¹

This essay comes out of my own procrastination. I have lists of to-dos floating around in my brain. When I start writing, it is hard to get to the place where I can even make an outline.

So you have to write a paper. How do you get inside your head and make it flow? How do you translate your thoughts to the page? What if you don’t want to get started at all? Some people, including myself, are worried about what will happen once they turn in the paper. Some people, including myself, are worried that they’re not enough of an expert to write on certain topics.

Timothy Pynchl, a guy who does research on procrastination, says that telling a procrastinator to “just do it” is like telling a depressed person to “just get over it.” Most procrastination is a form of resistance. But what does that mean?

“What is really going on here?” I ask myself when I get stuck. Hey, with writing, there are usually some kinds of demons afoot. These demons come in all sorts: You were assigned an essay about your mother and you didn’t have the greatest relationship with her; you have to write about noxious weeds which is something that’s really personal to you and you don’t know how to organize it in an academic manner; or you have to write about the rise of Burger King and you really do not care. Or maybe you weren’t engaged in the class or had to miss a lot due to some reasons out of your control. Or maybe reasons out of your control are eating at the page.

In the ideal world, I would process everything before I write about it. But class deadlines really don’t center around processing time. So how does one balance a deadline and self-care? Read on.

1. Quoted in Henriette Anne Klauser, *Writing on Both Sides of the Brain: Breakthrough Techniques for People Who Write* (New York: HarperOne, 1987).

There have been periods in my life of prolific writing and deep revising. And there have been times when I have been almost catatonic, too rocked by issues of this world to write anything. Believe me, all the varieties of writer's block, I got 'em. And most writers do, at some point. It's important to acknowledge procrastination instead of to condemn it. Condemning it makes procrastination worse.

There are some strategies for working around procrastination. Timothy Pynchyl suggests structured procrastination. This can work well when your due date is not 24 hours later. Structured procrastination happens when someone like me has this big list of things to do and conveniently ignores some of the most urgent ones, but presses on with some other tasks that are low-priority. That'd be turning in a stellar CD sample for a performing arts company two months before the deadline, while saying that you'll do your paper later. It's (eventually) win-win. The trick to keeping structured procrastination alive is the knowledge that eventually, maybe someday, probably soon, you'll work on that thing you're putting off.

Brainstorming is also a good technique when you're stuck. I know that, if you've read *Inkwell* before, you're probably sick of hearing about brainstorming. But my mom is right when she says, "You'll feel better when you at least make a list." I like the free-association technique where I put one word on my paper that reminds me of my project and then branch out from there. It gets me thinking and often leads to something larger.

Another way to start is to journal. One of my favorite kinds of journaling is to write a letter to someone. I had a writing mentor a few years ago to whom I wrote letters, often several times a day. She ended up returning my letters so that I could create a project. I still write her many letters, but I keep copies of them in my journal. It's a good brainstorming exercise. It's also a way to process ideas that I am sending out into the world. What my mentor doesn't know is that I have a bunch of unsent letters written to her that I use for writing prompts. The lesson of her sending those letters back isn't lost—ideas seem to come in an easier manner when it's informal writing. And we all have to trust our voice to carry us through at all times. Voice doesn't have to be written. It's good to talk some of this stuff out with a friend (or a shrink) (or a tutor in the Writing Center).

So go ahead and try it. Put "Dear Whoever" on the top of your paper and go.

It is also important to break things into small, manageable chunks. They say the brain works in forty-five minute cycles, so take a fifteen-minute break after every forty-five minutes. Work to break your task into bite-sized bits. Try busting off a chunk of the assignment at a time and working from there. It is also good to reward yourself as you are working with tea or something like that. Also, this may sound weird, but sometimes while we are working we forget to get up and go to the bathroom when nature calls, eat when we are hungry, or drink when we are thirsty. Please do these things.

On the opposite side, there's also the Shit-Or-Get-Off-The-Pot approach, the Power-Through: it's the fire under your butt. This approach is great, but requires plenty of skill and stamina. It involves writing for three hours straight, or from the afternoon until the birds are chirping in the morning, focusing all your energy on the task.

At the very end of the day (or the deadline I don't meet), some parts of procrastination are about not getting on with life itself. I can break things into small chunks and write letters till the cows come home, but if I really don't want to move on or get anything accomplished, that's a different story. I'm stuck in a time warp.

Eh, procrastination. It's something to reclaim, to work around, and yes, an impetus to get things done. However you get the thing done, though, is up to you. But don't forget to thank procrastination for your clean kitchen.