



# HOW TO SURVIVE AS A WRITER WITHIN THE LINEAR CONSTRUCTS OF ACADEMIC TIME

OR WHAT TO DO WHEN THE DEADLIES<sup>1</sup>  
ARE OUT TO GET YOU

WENDY R. MCCUTCHEN

This is not an article about how to “use your time wisely.” It’s your time, and I have no intention of taking ownership over what is rightfully yours. You will find none of the typical advice posited by black-bordered motivational posters or those pesky little tips found in the corners of agendas.

As a writer at Evergreen it is highly likely that in the approaching days, weeks, and months, a professor will say to you something along these lines: “You have [x amount] of time to write this paper.” Regardless of the way you might expect this progressive, contract-allowing, interdisciplinary, program-driven institution you have entered to behave, you will encounter deadlines. In many ways, deadlines and due dates can feel arbitrary, as if they are a force being exerted over you—a force which means to control you as a writer. Even though they may feel aggressive, due dates are usually chosen to facilitate communication and are necessary to fostering collective thinking. Sometimes, in the case of seminar papers, for example, it is simply a way to ensure that individuals studying the same text or subject are on the same page (both literally and figuratively).

My own relationship with writing has been rife with the difficulty of fitting the practices and intentions of my writing process into the time and space assigned by institutional forces (professors, deadlies, etc). I used to think I could weasel out of these constraints. Once upon a time, in a far away Week 8, I realized that one of my mischievous essays had become something that no longer fit the challenge of the assignment. I began working on another piece that better approached the challenges posed. I turned in two unfinished essays. While this effort ended happily, I haven’t always had the luxury of an understanding professor or been able to count on the prospect of extended deadlines. For me, avoiding them has not involved a happily ever after conclusion.

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1. What happens to deadlines when their teeth get too sharp

Just this quarter I received the news that the amount of overdue homework compounded with several unexcused absences would disqualify me from being able to continue onto the 2nd year of Evergreen's Master in Teaching program. While there were many paths untaken which led my professor to hand me this decision, there was one very clear contributor to my struggles over the past few months (and for much of my college career). If you could walk into my room, you would see all the classic signs of chaos: all manner of papers and books and bed sheets populate each patch of floor in disarray. I was alternately pulling all-nighters early in the week and deciding to sleep through class on Friday mornings. I churned out writing that was often mindless. My engagement with my ideas steadily declined and I found fewer and fewer reasons to value the work I was doing. I felt completely controlled by the seemingly insurmountable list of tasks. I was without my own space to breathe.

To better clarify: I moved into a new place first week of spring quarter—hurriedly, while recovering from a nasty cold. I had little chance to settle in before the quarter's work really got rolling. While the physical disorder of my academic life was not the source of the underlying disconnect I had with my program, it certainly catapulted the difficulty of the situation to terrifying heights. Stacks of papers became my own personal monsters of self-doubt. Suffice to say I have had somewhat limited success in my own endeavors to manage my time and meet deadlines. I felt like a failure. I was a smart, driven, committed writer and student, yet I continued to have trouble with deadlines (which I continue to misspell *deadlies*). Sometimes even looking at a schedule makes my stomach feel gushy. Of the many thorny lessons I learned from this attempt, I am proud to say I am more certain about the kind of physical resources I need to be a more productive learner and writer.

My struggles with fitting my writing process into the margins between due dates often have been compounded by seemingly nonsensical advice about better managing my time. Each piece of advice seemed impersonal and unhelpful: “Be practical about it,” or “make a to-do list,” or “turn off the internet.” Implicit in each of these messages is a command. One of the reasons it has been difficult for me to take to heart the advice about dealing with deadlies and due dates is because I don't like being commanded. I feel as if it is an additional takeover of my practice. I am resistant because I like the way I do things, and the advice given to me feels like it is dismissing the pleasurable and mostly functional ways I already get things done. I have so often brushed off suggestions about organization because they ask me to compromise my practices without considering their current application. Because the way each writer approaches and feels about creating a text is personal and incredibly distinctive, any one-size-fits-all approach to organization can be stifling. And while we may regularly feel our practices are stifled, it is imperative that we approach navigating the compromises asked of us.

As the Co-Editor of this publication, I am more than aware of the necessity of inflexible due dates—people depend upon, rely upon, and communicate via deadlines (and communication is so often worth the compromise). However, my experiences and experiences writers have shared with me in tutoring sessions have illustrated that the processes of thinking and communicating do not immediately play well with the linear structures of time measurement.

For better or for worse, the system of minutes, hours, days, and weeks has become a collective constraint under which all social beings must preside. To be seen as legitimate, our social, and certainly academic, interactions must fit into the prescribed meeting points generally referred to as due dates or deadlines. Because the construct of time will be applied in linear fashion to the often nonlinear way in which we write, managing it is a concept which must be overcome. So what's a writer to do?

Luckily, this system of constraints has a structure which can be studied, then navigated effectively, if we take into account the ways each of us as writers process through our thoughts, mutterings, and textual creations. If we accept time as a force which can't be stopped, stemmed, or slowed, we can begin to see time management in light of what we can control; we have to translate what we think of as controlling or managing time into controlling space, energy, and resources. In order to keep our voices alive, we can put to use our knowledge of these three things to better live and survive as writers beneath the constraints of the linearly structured system of academic deadlines.

I hesitate to use the word (because it is so tied to the unhelpful advice), but organization is key.

Now I don't mean an organization that is given to you (administered by a syllabus or professor) but one that you give to yourself. First you should examine yourself as a writer, a communicator, and as an individual to determine what makes the process you go through to write seem doable and sustainable. That process could include a host of distinctive techniques. One writer who frequents the Writing Center, for example, considers going to the sauna before beginning a paper to be an integral part of her writing process. Every writer is unique in what supports their minds and bodies in the act of communication, and you can use your knowledge about your practices and intentions to strategize about meeting deadlines. When I am asked to write about new, big, and fascinating ideas, I know I like to try out fresh ways of writing. Because I am aware of this preference, I need to (in addition to considering the professor's requirements) meet requirements I set for myself. I need to:

- Collect ideas about new writing methods from my peers, colleagues, and mentors;
- Give myself time to think about these new ways of writing and which would be best suited to the idea;
- Find space and energy to try out this new method.

The initial difficulty of any survival tactic is finding the space and energy to feel out your process and strategize. It's awesome if you can manage this on your own, but totally cool if every time you sit down to think about schedules and space and energy, you feel queasy and get up to play Ultimate Frisbee instead. There is a place on campus already carved out for this sort of thing. The Writing Center is open six days a week and is filled with resources, with space for your energy, and with other supportive writers. We would love to join you in your efforts to strategize about how to keep yourself and your writing alive after being bombarded by a series of deadlines.

If that's not the thing for you, that's okay, too. You could consult your friends, peers, and classmates if it helps (and usually it does). My hope is simply that you endeavor to build a structure for your writing processes with nuances of your own choosing, lest your processes as a writer and student be structured by those administering the deadlines. In the spirit of those who have been doing so against oppressive forces throughout history, organize (your physical and mental energy), organize (your physical space and resources), organize (your support network), or else you are bound to be organized (by due dates).