

## ADVICE

# Planning a Productive Summer



Brian Taylor for The Chronicle

*By Noah Shusterman* | FEBRUARY 28, 2013

Summer is both an academic's best friend and biggest challenge. Freed from routines and obligations in early May, summer beckons, promising you long days of productivity sitting at a desk and typing away, not so much thinking as recording the words that a muse is whispering in your ears.

Things rarely work out that way, of course. By August there is a mad rush to have something to show for your "time off," soon interrupted by the coming demands of the fall semester: syllabi, meetings, proposals. Your goal of three finished book chapters and a journal article ends up looking more like a halfway-drafted chapter and a bunch of jotted-down thoughts. For graduate students and faculty

members, no season is looked back on with as much regret as the unproductive summer.

I know that because I have had my share of unproductive summers. But I have had some productive ones, too. And I have figured out some things along the way. No promises, no guarantees in what follows, but this is what has worked for me. And now is a good time to start thinking about it.

**Treat your summer writing projects like a long road trip.** Every summer we drive to New England from our home in Philadelphia, usually up to see my mom in Vermont. It is a long drive. There is no way around it if we're going by car. But that doesn't mean that it shouldn't take as little time as possible. Do the drive correctly, and we still have half a day to enjoy upon arrival. Do it incorrectly, and we spend the whole day in transit.

So when I say that you should treat your summer writing like a long road trip, I do not mean like Jack Kerouac hitchhiking across the U.S.A.—more like the long drive to Mom's. Driving speed is only one factor here. The far bigger factors are how quickly you get out the door in the morning and how long you spend stopping for lunch.

If you pack your bags the night before, wake up on time, and head out the door quickly, you're off to a good start. If you know the route you're taking and where to stop to eat, so much the better. But linger around the house in the morning, gaze over the maps pondering routes, take a few wrong turns, wander around looking for restaurants, and a seven-hour drive is now taking 10 or 12 hours, and driving 80 miles an hour in a 65 zone will not change that.

Summer writing is similar. If you want to have a productive summer, you need to know what you want to work on first and then start writing early. Make those decisions as the spring semester ends, and then start writing early. The key—and I cannot stress this enough—is to have something to show for May and June. Do not count on making up for those months later on. And when it is time to take a break, make sure you set a time for that break to end.

**Have an insanely ambitious plan.** A productive summer starts with a plan. Usually, that means a set of writings that you'll prioritize, and perhaps some readings as well, or even some archival work. Set your priorities before the summer gets under way. That will help keep you from starting five different projects and not finishing any of them.

But if you are making a plan, why not make it an ambitious one? One summer a few years ago—after three straight summers where I set ambitious goals and did not reach any of them—I set myself more modest, achievable goals. Guess what? I still did not reach them.

Lesson: Give yourself something to strive for. At the end, it is easy enough to be satisfied with what you have accomplished. Come September, the pile of pages you've written means a lot more than the one-page plan you wrote in April.

**Set achievable goals.** OK, that rule sounds like it contradicts the have-an-insanely-ambitious-plan rule, but it doesn't. Because the key here is to set goals that you could actually achieve because they depend only on you. A goal like "write 30,000 words of publishable work in May" is a daunting task, but whether or not you succeed is up to you. On the other hand, a goal like "Get an article published in *The New Yorker*" isn't up to you. It's up to the editors at *The New Yorker*.

If you want to publish, you need to write work that's publishable. Once that's done, you need to go about getting it published. But at that second stage, not only is the decision out of your hands, so is the timeline.

**Never double down.** If you use a system of daily writing goals, be willing to accept lost days. In other words, if your goal is 1,000 words a day, and you only write 200 on Tuesday, Wednesday's goal should still be 1,000 words. That is true for weekly and monthly goals as well. The alternative is a growing goal that becomes harder and harder to reach. Sleepless nights soon follow.

**Focus early, wander late.** Curious about the latest developments in art history? Want to know more about the links between the Frankfurt School and poststructuralism? Summer is a great time to broaden your horizons. But wait until you have something to show for your time before you start doing exploratory work. To go back to the road-trip metaphor: Do your sightseeing after you get there and your bags are unpacked, not when you know you still have driving to do.

**When it's vacation, it's vacation.** Finally, it is, after all, summer. Looking back on a summer where you didn't have any fun is just as depressing as looking back on an unproductive season. Set aside some time to enjoy yourself, to hang out with friends and family. Then, during those times you've set aside, leave your books and your computer behind and actually enjoy yourself.

Those are tactics that have helped me. They may or may help you, as we all work in different ways. But March is a good time to plant the seeds for a good summer. If you have a suggestion for how to make the summer months more productive, be sure to share it in the comments section below.

*Noah Shusterman is an assistant professor of history and intellectual heritage at Temple University. His second book, "The French Revolution: Faith, Desire and Politics" will be published in the fall.*

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