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## Advice

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### The Writing Date

*By Rachel Toor*

I am on a first date. It is 10:30 a.m. I am wearing ripped jeans, a ratty old T-shirt under two thick layers of polar fleece, and my hair has not been washed in -- well, I won't say how long.

I had a bout of anxiety about this date last night. What if I have nothing to say? What if I can't make it work? How am I going to last for three hours?

I arrived first, scoped out the perfect table, and got coffee. I unpacked and settled in. I was under way before Chris even showed up.

When she did, she told me she needed 10 minutes of therapy before we got started: It had been a rough morning. Halley, her 2-year-old daughter was a little cranky, but nothing unusual. Les, her husband, had to leave early for an appointment, and Chris had to take their son Dylan to school before teaching at 9 a.m., but all of that was manageable. She was, however, beside herself. Freaked out. A mess. Finally, she realized that her panic was about our date.

Not so much about the fact that we had decided to meet, but that we were getting together to write. It was, of course, the writing that was freaking her out.

Chris is an assistant professor of English. She is a dynamic and adored teacher, a hard-working member of our department who volunteers for every committee, a head of a program that isn't even in her main discipline, and a good friend to many. She has a rich and busy life that leaves little time for the publishing she needs to do to earn tenure.

I have a butt-in-the-chair problem: I don't like sitting down to write. If I can get myself into an appropriate writing space, I work hard. But at home, there are papers to read, friends to call, classes to prepare for, Internet sites to surf, an adorable pet rat to cuddle, trashy novels to enjoy, space to be stared into. It's a lot easier not to write than it is to write.

Perhaps that's why I've found I am most productive writing in busy, bustling places. Put me in an airport and I'll crank out an essay; plant me in a cafe with 80's music blaring and steel-cut oatmeal, and I can finish a book. For me, finding the right place to write is essential. But while I travel a lot, I can't afford to book enough flights to get done all that I need to do.

One of the best pieces of advice I got in graduate school was to write in a different place from where I read student work or did research. It gave writing not only a privileged time, but also a special place; being there meant being conditioned to do a certain kind of work. If you're a runner, as I am, it's like going to the track. If I want to have fun running, I hit the trails. But my body knows that if I step foot onto a 400-meter oval, it's all business. The track is a serious place, a locus of all work and no fun.

It's hard to get yourself out the door for a session of all work and no fun. I'm a big fan of fun. I'm also a big fan of my friends. So I've corralled Chris into agreeing to a regular writing date.

It's similar to the concept of the "sober friend," now a sad necessity in the lives of many celebrities, whose real "friends" bring them so far down into the world of partying that they need to pay someone to be with them to keep them clean and bring in the values and practices of a life less destructive.

A while ago, when I lived in Durham, N.C., I had a running partner named Jeff. He had been hired as a faculty member with the proviso that he finish his dissertation in his first year. It wasn't going well. As I was wont to drop by his office at random times during the day, he decided that whenever I popped in and found him not working, he would have to pay me \$20.

That could have been a bonanza for me. But there were two problems. I won't take a friend's money, and, more important, forking it over caused him no pain. He was financially comfortable. His messed-up attempt at punitive self-motivation was a lot easier than finishing the diss.

So instead, I started babysitting Jeff. I'd go to his office with my computer and camp out. I'd work while he worked. Sometimes, when he got really stuck, I would tell him to explain to me what he was trying to write in the chapter and I would type it into my computer. Then I'd show it to him and tell him to fill in the technical details. Then he'd give it back to me and I'd massage it into something more like readable prose.

But mostly, what I did was sit with him. Occasionally, we'd take a break and talk about basketball, argue about his silly sports theories, or go scavenging for candy in his colleague's office. I came to understand a little here about the computer science of reinforcement learning for autonomous vehicles. But I also learned something else: I can get a lot of writing done when I'm stuck in a room with someone else who is writing.

When I moved to Montana, I found another running partner, coincidentally also named Jeff. This one was an economist who, as a junior faculty member, always had tons of grading to do and journal articles to write. We would make dates to meet at a coffee shop and work in tandem, consuming massive amounts of hot liquid and occasionally catching each other surfing the Net. But I always ended up staying longer than I thought I had in me, and getting more done. And I was always less miserable than when I went by myself.

Now I'm in Spokane and haven't yet found a running partner or another new friend named Jeff. But I have Chris. When I talked her into being my new writing date, she was enthusiastic at first. Then she worried that she would have to schlep around all of her books and research materials.

No, I said. I know her well enough to know that she -- and many other academics -- love doing research. What could be better than sitting for two hours reading Wordsworth poems that you know and love? The problem was that "working" for her meant doing the reading and thinking that comes easily, naturally, and pleurably. But that wasn't getting journal articles or book proposals written.

At a certain point, you have to leave the library carrel and come out into the hard, cold light of the writing cafe. You have to face the empty page, the black document. You have to write.

I convinced Chris that she could get away with not schlepping her stuff by using a writer's trick. When you get to a part where you need to look up specific facts or flesh out more research, instead of giving up and heading back to the familiar comfort of the library, you write CHECK in the text and keep plowing on. Going back and actually checking things can be a satisfying task, like washing the dishes after a good meal.

I also convinced her that busyness is one of the tics of academic life. Professors are always way too busy. But carving out time for

writing is essential to production. There's simply no way around it. We need to construct student-proof, family-proof, Spider Solitaire-proof fences around our writing time.

We've been here for two and a half hours. We took a short break to eat and talk a bit. She showed me what she had so far. It's looking good. I asked if it was OK if I wrote about her. "Sure," she said. "You can say that, when faced with the prospect of a writing date, I had a panic attack."

Chris knows she's not the only one who feels that way. For an academic, going to work can mean many things. Filling up a day with productive activity is not hard, but the work is also not always visible; committing to spend three hours doing nothing but writing means that by the time we leave, we will have something to show for it.

Today, at the end of our first date, Chris has a detailed outline and a good start on a journal article. I have still-unwashed hair and the first draft of a column.

I'm looking forward to our next date.

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