

Good Morning everyone, this is Trevor Van Winkle, and you're listening to – Homestead on the Corner.

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Well – the opening to lesson 10 has aged very poorly, very quickly. To be fair, I don't think anyone really anticipated how this year would play out when it got started. Quick show of hands for anyone who thought 2020 would turn out this way? Anybody?

In all seriousness though, do everything you can do to keep yourself and your community safe and healthy. Work from home if you can. Maintain social distancing. Help other where you can, especially small business owners and those at risk from the disease. Limit contact with others. Cover your mouth with your elbow when you sneeze or cough, and wash your hands frequently, for at least 20 seconds, with warm water and soap. I know you've all heard this, but this virus is completely new, and we as a species have no defense against it – no vaccine, no natural immunity, and no cure. Our only chance is to specifically engineer our behavior to keep it from spreading.

I imagine for most of us, the order to self-isolate hasn't been too difficult. Writers tend to be a solitary lot, and we can be quite happy to spend time inside with our imaginations. I know that's definitely not true of all writers, and even those of us who might be called "anti-social" at the best of times tend to get a little stir crazy – especially if you're isolating with your family, and they just won't stop distracting you. You really shouldn't get so stressed about it. After all... All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. All work and....

Sorry. I've been spending the last few weeks working on script for our new horror series, *The Sheridan Tapes*, so I have spooks on the mind. Back to the point at hand, I think that a lot of writers – myself chief among them – fall for the myth of time a lot. We think that if we only had *time* to write, all the distractions and obstacles would finally fall away, and we'd effortlessly write that book/screenplay/series we've always dreamed of writing. One of the hardest learning experiences any writer can go through, I think, is one that dispels that myth: a period of time that takes away everything you imagined as an obstacle and waves your aspirational projects in your face, taunting you with your inability to stop procrastinating. I've had more than a few of those – the most recent one on my writing trip to the Oregon coast, which was supposed to be when I finished my latest book. Instead, I spent all my time writing *The Stars Eternal* and a script for a Halloween special that never ended up happening and watching too much *Star Trek*.

That was a kinder, gentler experience than most people get on that section of the learning curve, but it was still aggravating. Every night I beat myself up over the fact that I didn't even touch the manuscript I'd specifically come here to work on. I'm sure many of us are going through the same thing right now, banging our heads against the wall and wondering why we didn't get as much done between sunrise and sundown as we

wanted to. Did we really spend that many hours watching Netflix? Why can't we just focus and get it done?

In this final lesson of *Homestead on the Corner*, season 1, as we all stare down at least another few months of social isolation and uncertainty, I'm here to tell you what I wish I'd known, offer encouragement, and give you strategies to do what I always ask at the end of each episode: **Keep Writing.**

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How long can you write without a plan?

How long could you, with no structure for your story or the way you write it, keep putting one word after another? When would your inspiration run dry, or how quickly would life get in the way of just "writing when you're inspired?"

I'm not trying to dismiss the value of that kind of free writing. It's incredibly liberating and often unlocks greater creativity and daring than a more structured, systematic approach. But it has its limits, and one of the biggest is its lack of sustainability. Allow me to illustrate: let's say you're standing in the middle of a vast, open field where you can't see anything beyond the horizon. The field is covered in tall grass, so you can't see quite where you're going no matter which way you turn. You could start walking in any direction, wander however long you wanted, and just see what you find. You might decide to go left, and eventually you do find something interesting – but it was only by chance. You might just have easily chosen to go right and found nothing, or fallen off the edge of a sudden cliff. It's nothing but dumb luck, and psychologically, most people probably won't go very far from somewhere they know is safe if the alternative is unknown.

What if, instead, you could see a small peak in the distance. You aim towards it, knowing that it's somewhere you want to go. You cut a straight path towards it, using the landmark as a beacon. Even if you hit obstacles, you can go around them and then keep moving towards your goal. Odds are, you will walk for longer and over more difficult terrain than you would have while wandering blind, and your commitment to reaching the end-goal would be greater than it would be if your goal was simply exploring at random.

Let's run this thought experiment one more time, and this time put a trail through the grass to that mountain. With firm ground underfoot and a planned, knowable route to follow, you can hike for days towards a mountain even further in the distance. You'll move quicker, but also slow down at points where the trail builders brought the grade up above the grass so you can take in the view. You'll avoid obstacles that you might have fallen into while wandering blindly, and when you arrive at your destination, the

journey will have been smoother, more direct, and more fulfilling than fumbling through an open field would have been.

Most writing, especially the long-form projects most of us are looking at right now, is not a sprint, but a marathon. Writing, editing, and reworking narratives is a long and often frustrating process that involves long hours and lots of questions that don't have definitive answers. It's mentally and emotionally draining most days, and so **the three most important things in writing seriously are planning, practice, and pacing.**

**Planning means making sure you know what you're writing, when you're writing it, and most importantly, why you're writing it.** There is so much ambiguity when you sit down in front of a blank page that it can be immobilizing. Knowing what this thing you're trying to bring into the world really is can be a huge first step, limiting the scope of possibilities from infinity to a few hundred million. This is where the premise and central idea of your story become hugely important.

The next step you should take is to decide when you're going to work on your magnum opus – and no, “whenever I feel inspired” or “morning, noon, and night” are not good answers. They represent opposite problems with your work plan: in the first case, you'll never feel inspired consistently enough to finish your narrative, and in the second, you'll burn yourself out in the first week. Finding a time when you can consistently write at least 4 or 5 days a week is a great place to start. Even if you just sit down and draw a blank for a few of those days, you're putting the time in. You're making writing a habit, and signaling to your brain that “this is when we're creative.” In time the rebellious creative parts of your brain will get with the program, and you'll find that the muse likes consistency just as much as you do. If you want, you can try adding extra time or days to your writing schedule then, but I'd caution you against trying to write seven days a week. If you wouldn't want your employer to call you on Sundays and take you away from your family, then don't do it to yourself.

When I talk about practice, there are two sides, and I think both are equally important. The first is the obvious meaning of the phrase: writing frequently and getting better at it through repetition. As in athletic training, consistent engagement and a gradual increase in workload grows your endurance, practical skill, and overall ability. One of the best things I did when I first started writing is a practice called **Morning Pages**. I first heard of this practice from Julia Cameron in *The Right to Write*, a great little book of encouragement and teachings for writers just getting started. In her words, “**Morning Pages are three pages of daily longhand writing.** They are about anything and everything that crosses your mind. They may be petty, whiny, boring, and angry. They may be cheerful, illuminating, insightful, and introspective. **There is no wrong way to do them.**”

It's easy to see why this practice is so helpful, especially if you're just getting started. It teaches you to translate your thought patterns onto the page. It familiarizes you with the pattern of prose, which is hugely helpful in making the leap from imagining your stories to actually writing them. And most importantly, it brings you to the page first thing in the morning. It's like early morning drills for endurance runners – even in the off season, they keep you sharp and in the habit.

The second meaning of practice could more accurately be described as *rehearsal* – similar to practice for a theatrical production rather than an athletic competition. In live theatre, scenes are run over and over again with the actors, director, and technical crew long before opening night. It isn't just to help everyone remember their lines (though that is a part of it). It's about finding moments that would be powerful and memorable if performed a certain way, or discovering emotional through-lines and making character arcs apparent so the performances carry the plot. Sometimes, it's even about finding the play itself, when the appeal or substance of the story isn't apparent from the words on the page, or the director has a different vision for the production.

In the singular act of writing, I believe we rehearse our stories as well. We mostly do it in our heads when we're not writing, imagining the characters moving and speaking and trying to figure out how they'd act in certain situations. Each draft prior to publication could even be described as a dress rehearsal: still rough and missing some big elements, but a necessary step before the show's ready for the big time.

There is a shortcut you can take, though, and one that I'd recommend doing if you're struggling with where to go next in your story: **beat boards** – a series of notecards with each of your major story beats written out and put on the wall. This is a trick I picked up in film school, and a lot of writers don't like to use it. However, I like to think of it as externalizing the rehearsal already going on inside your head, and polishing the storyline before it ends up tied up and concealed in dense prose. It's easier to see where the weak points are if you have to lay out a series of scenes and discover huge gaps in logic between them. An added benefit is that by putting them on notecards rather than in a linear outline, you feel freer to shuffle, reorder, reinvent, and reimagine your story than when it's a. put down in a linear format or b. tenuously held in your memory or across scattered pages of notes.

Whether you use 3x5 cards, post-it notes, scrap-paper, or a digital notecard program, formalizing your mental rehearsals will make your narrative stronger, free you up to find new solutions, and make the blank page a little less terrifying.

And finally, **how you pace yourself is one of the strongest determinants of whether you'll be able to keep writing in the long term.** It's not too far off to say that we're usually the worst boss we could ever have, especially if you're a semi-neurotic type-A perfectionist like myself. We disregard the boundaries professional environments put in

place to protect employees' time and sanity and push ourselves to the breaking point because we think we can take it.

Once again, writing morning, noon, and night is the exact recipe for burnout, frustration, and disillusionment. From all I've read, most professional, published writers really only write for 4 hours a day at most. Writing isn't a mindless, mechanical job that you can do without putting much thought or effort in (despite what you might think about certain writers). It's sitting down at the keyboard and bleeding, creating your own private universe full of confusing, contradictory characters and trying to corral them towards a central plot. It's emotionally, mentally, and at times physically draining process. Our brains often don't know the difference between real experiences and our imaginations, and thus react in much the same way. Writing a heartbreaking deathbed moment, we draw on our own experiences with death – memories we generally try to avoid in everyday life. When writing a humanized villain, we have to dig deep into the parts of ourselves we don't want to admit are there and dredge up cruelty, greed, and malice from within our own souls. You can't do that for 8 hours a day, five days a week. Most people (myself included) can only do it for an hour before feeling genuinely ill.

This is another place where your story rehearsal comes in handy: you know when you'll be writing those scenes, and can mentally prepare. When writing my most recent novel (the one I didn't work on during my trip), I knew that everything from the midpoint on would be soul-wrenching to write. Thankfully, I was able to write those chapters while on vacation with my family, and thus didn't have to go into work after writing things that still turn my stomach a little when I read them.

All that to say, **you should set definitive limits on when and how much you write.** With all the pre-planning and rehearsal I do for my novels, I like to write them at the Stephen King pace of 2,000 words a day, which generally takes me 2-3 hours or less each day. Since I'm an early riser, I tended to do my writing before the normal workday started, finish breakfast and getting straight to it. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes I ended up so stressed I had a mini-breakdown. It really depends on the project. I know other people who prefer to write at night, but that's never been my thing, since I just want to zone out and go to sleep after the sun goes down. I've also had some success with a mid-afternoon writing break, but that's largely because I usually have my second cup of coffee around that time.

What I'm trying to say is, you should find a limited window of time, based on your own ability and writing endurance, to write a certain number of words. Whether that's 3-4 hours on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings, or an hour every day around midnight, find a consistent, regular pace to work on your projects. Habit is one of the most powerful tools of the human mind. Just by forcing ourselves to do something regularly and consistently, we can train our minds and bodies to do just about anything,

for good or ill. Personally, I don't think there's any better habit you can get into than writing in a planned, practiced, and well-paced manner.

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But I've talked about many of these practices before. You already know what you need to do to keep writing, and it's mostly just to get started. You'll either do it or you won't, and little I say can sway you one way or the other. So why am I ending my season with this message? Why is the final episode of *Homestead on the Corner* season one a lesson that, quite possibly, nobody needs?

Well. I think we all know why. It starts with S and rhymes with Elf-Isolation. All of a sudden our excuses are gone, and many of us don't know how to function without them. It's a very comfortable place to be, calling yourself a writer while not actually doing any writing. But suddenly, many of us don't have jobs to hide behind anymore. We can't say, "Oh, I'm a barista, but I really want to be a writer." Well surprise, you can be one now. Here's a pen. Go nuts.

The problem, I think, is that most people don't want to be a writer half as much as they want to say they're a writer. And since writing is such an immediate, personal act, it's easy to pretend you're writing when you're really just composing words in your head. It's a first step, and an indication of the incredible creative imagination inherent to the human race, but writing, it is not.

I never really had any ambition to become a writer, or make this a full-time career. I always thought I wanted to be a filmmaker, and in some ways I still do, because I grew up watching movies almost every night and thought that was the way to tell stories. I didn't attach much importance to all the writing I did – I enjoyed it, sure, but I never thought I would try to make a professional craft out of it. I don't know quite what possessed me to write *The Gräzland Tales*, but I'm glad it did. I'm so glad that, for whatever reason, I woke up one day during my final semester of college and decided to write a web serial, and then a book, and then self-publish, and then make this podcast. I approached writing fearlessly – perhaps a little too flippantly, but I did it. I made mistakes and learned from them. I kept trying new things, throwing out what didn't work and testing what did to figure out why. **I kept writing.**

There's a plaque in a garden in Mexico. It sits in the middle of *Camino de la Salud*, "the walk of life," in the center of the Sandos Playacar vacation resort. It's carved in a rough-hewn slice of tree stump, pitted with knots and split down the middle with a thin, branching crack. In white letters slightly faded by the relentless sun, it reads: "The number one skill in life is not giving up." I believe it's the number one skill in writing too. Having a hard skull and being willing to mercilessly kill your fear of other's opinions and instead speak your truth through story, plot, and character – that is what makes you a writer, more than the number of books you've published or the scripts you've optioned.

Yes, we have to acknowledge that this is an incredibly difficult time for everyone. Yes, we have to acknowledge the risks of this virus and take all the necessary precautions to keep ourselves and our communities safe. No, we should absolutely not be glad this is happening. People are dying, full stop. But while we shelter in place and do our best to help alleviate this crisis, how much of that time do we really want to spend wallowing in fear or self-pity?

Changing circumstances present an opportunity to end up better or worse off than when we started. And, as heartbreaking as it is to look at the news and hear of makeshift morgues and “do not resuscitate” orders, death is the great clarifier of life. It reminds us that we all have to face the reaper someday, and maybe far sooner than we think. It reminds us that life is short and horrifyingly uncertain. It shows us how few of the things that surround us really matter, and clears away the junk so we have room to embrace new challenges and new opportunities. And, for writers, it fills our hearts with emotions and ideas we need to share the only way we know how.

**The world needs honesty, clarity, and hope, now more than ever.** So to all who can hear me, I say this: **when it feels like your world is falling apart around you... Keep writing. Keep writing. Keep writing.**

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Thank you for listening to Homestead on the Corner! Season one was written and produced by Trevor Van Winkle, and featured the voices of Lauren Baker, Amitola Lomas, Airen Neeley Chaconas, Jeff Frome, Leslie Redman, Sam Taylor, Maurice Cooper, Jenna Lynch, Marlene Piper, Alex Brown, Jesse Steele, Michael Dostrow, Chris Martin, Susan Dalian, Charles Scatolini, Marcy Murray, Virginia Spotts, Bohdi Silva, Lesley-Anne Hoxie, Juliana Olinka Jones, Allison McDonell Page, Victoria Ann Farber, and Gus Krieger. Original music was composed by Lauren Baker and Jesse Haugen, with end credit songs from The Bodie 601 Band, I’m a Lion, I’m a Wolf, Brittain Ashford, The Longest Johns, and Brother James. Sound effects were provided by Freesounds.org and Stainless Films.

Our season one patrons were Shirley Casperson, Virginia Spotts, Jesse Steele, Sierra Classic Theatre, and Mammoth Lakes Repertory Theatre. Thank you all so much for your support. If you’d like to join them for Season two, go to [patreon.com/homesteadcorner](https://patreon.com/homesteadcorner) and sign up to become a monthly donor.

Can’t wait for more content? Me neither. Head over to Twitter and Instagram, where you can find me at [trevor\\_vw](https://twitter.com/trevor_vw), and visit [homesteadonthecorner.com](https://homesteadonthecorner.com) for extra material, outtakes, and more info about the show. Season two of Homestead on the Corner will begin next week, so be sure and subscribe so you don’t miss it. Our new show, *The Sheridan Tapes*, begins on Friday April 24<sup>th</sup>, so keep an eye on this feed for teasers and more info in coming few weeks.

Thank you all so much for listening and being a part of this weird little show. That's about all for now, so... From the Homestead on the Corner, have a great day, and keep writing.