

30 TIPS FOR 30 DAYS

**KICK-START YOUR
NOVEL AND GET OUT
OF YOUR OWN WAY**

A NANO HANDBOOK

BY DEVON ELLINGTON



**30 Tips for 30 Days: Kick Start Your Novel and Get Out of Your Own
Way**

By Devon Ellington

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Dedicated to

Writers who just sit down and DO it

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Other material was developed through the series of writing workshops I teach. Feel free to visit <http://www.fearlessink.com/workshops.html> for more information.

I have to thank again Brenda Birch, the publisher and editor of *The Scruffy Dog Review* (www.thescruffydogreview.com) for letting me share my thoughts on the writing process both in “The Literary Athlete” column and in the weekly Scruffy Dog Review Blog: (<http://thescruffydogreview.wordpress.com>).

If you get the chance to do Nano, jump at it. It’s fun to write in community and to get out of your own way. Many of the techniques with which you experiment during this month of community creative insanity can be applied to the rest of your work, be it fiction or non-fiction.

PART ONE:

PREPARATION

Blogs/Journals

It can be very helpful to create a blog or journal to help you through the process. You can write it in longhand in a blank book, or keep it on your computer. My preferred blog host is Word Press (www.wordpress.com). They are easy to use, have terrific customer service, a variety of customizable templates, and they're free.

The only rule about journal entries is to date each one. That way, you can refer back and keep the entry within context. There will be many ups and downs on this road, and it's helpful to look back as you're moving forward; see where you've been to help you get where you're going.

You might want to write before you start your work, as a warm-up. Or you might want to write after you've completed your day's work. In either case, daily entries will help you in the process, and will help you once you've finished.

Word Count

The type of book you write determines your word count. Romance novels and many mysteries often come in between 75,000 and 90,000 words, while literary fiction and fantasy hover around 100,000. Do some research within your genre and figure out a rough number.

If this is your first novel, try to stay in the 100k ballpark. It will make it an easier sell when you get to that point.

Take your number and divide it by the number of days you plan to work. That will tell you your daily quota. Your quota is the number of words you need to hit every day in order to complete the work on time.

If you're doing Nano, the goal is only 50,000 words in 30 days, which means you only have to write 1667 per day to meet the goal. I prefer to frontload Nano, writing 2500 words per day. That way, I complete my goal by November 20 and don't have to stress out during times such as American Thanksgiving. Also, by getting ahead, I leave myself room in case life gets in the way.

If you plan a 100k word count and want to finish within November, then you have to write 3,333 words per day.

If you plan 75K, it's an even 2500 per day.

For 90K, it's 3000 words/day.

If you figure roughly 250 words per page, you can figure a page count along with the word count.

The purpose of Nano is to hit 50K in 30 days. That doesn't mean you have to finish *the novel* in 30 days. Hit 50K in November and keep writing.

Every book has its own internal rhythm, which is why it's important to find something you can write quickly for Nano. However, my normal daily quota is 1500 words/day outside of Nano. You can use Nano as your springboard, and then keep going.

Rituals, Routines, Timing

I prefer to write in the morning, before I am “tainted by the day”. I get up, feed the cats (or nothing gets done), do yoga, and then I sit down to write. During Nano, I stay there until I’ve written 2500 words; otherwise, the goal is 1500.

Then and ONLY then, am I free to start my day – breakfast, shower, other freelance work, catching a train to a site job, etc.

It’s fine to occasionally skip a day; it’s when you start skipping a sequence of days that you trip yourself up.

Often, I light a candle when I start writing, and extinguish it when I’ve met my goals for the day. I have a creativity altar to keep me inspired. I light the candle there and then move it to my desk. I also use the altar as “quiet space” where I can brainstorm when necessary.

Outline or Blank Page?

There are two traps here: one is to over-outline and use that as an excuse to not get down to writing. The other is to blank page (also called “pantsing”) and then not know what to do next.

There is nothing wrong with either technique, unless it prevents you from doing the actual writing.

For something like Nano, I suggest that you outline. That way, you can sit down each day and have an idea of the day’s work, thereby meeting your quota. When you Blank Page, it’s very easy to sit down, be overtired or unfocused, say “I can’t”, get up and walk away. Do that for a few days, and you’ve blown your goal.

You’re not in competition with any one except yourself, but unfinished projects drain creative energy. Make the commitment to do this, fulfill the commitment during the month, go past it if you need to in order to finish, and THEN decide where you’ll take it.

Remember, you are under no obligation to ever publish this. So don’t look at it and think, “it sucks, no one will ever want it.” If you choose to keep working on future drafts, it will have a life beyond Nano. If you choose to stick it in a drawer and use what you learned on a different project, that’s fine. It’s your CHOICE. But make sure it’s a CHOICE and not a cop-out by finishing.

If you decide to outline, it doesn’t need to be anything fancy. I do what I call a “Writer’s Rough”, which is basically a scene list with a sentence or two of description or dialogue about each scene. When I sit down to write, I fill it in. For me, that is the best of both worlds – I’ve got a framework, but I’ve got room to explore.

There’s also nothing wrong with keeping it all in your head, if you’re good at that. Sometimes, writing it down dilutes the creative pressure, and you need to build it in order to have the momentum to carry you through.

Don’t be afraid of tangents – the focus here is words on paper. You cut and shape in the next draft.

Character or Plot?

That depends on the way you like to work.

I'm character-driven. The character has to speak to me strongly, tell me his or her story. Then I start asking questions, and asking "what if?" and we go from there.

Sometimes, a situation will intrigue me, a premise will intrigue me. But until I have a character to drive the piece, I'm stalled.

Some people work better from plot and shape characters to serve the plot. It's personal preference.

Also, remember this is a playground. Don't be afraid to switch up your process. Every novel involves a bit of reinventing the wheel. Insisting "this is my process" will often hinder you rather than help you. You're trying to create, not follow a formula, even in genre work.

Quantity over Quality

This is where many get frustrated. The point of writing a great deal of material, as in Nano, in thirty days, is to get words on paper. First drafts are where you see what you have, if your characters and ideas have the stamina to make it through a novel.

There are times when you figure out you need to go down a different route. That's fine. But don't go back and rewrite what you've done up until now. You need to *move forward*.

What you can do is to go back and mark, in a different color, what I call "placeholders" – notes where you want to make changes in the next draft. And then continue from your stopping point with the new direction.

If you keep going back to revise, you won't finish. I believe that it's detrimental to revise until you have an entire first draft, because you need to get the big picture before you can focus on the details. In subsequent drafts, you can work on each chapter as much as you want before moving on; you can flow back and forth. But in first drafts, keep moving forward.

In my experience as a writer, a Trusted Reader, a mentor, a teacher, and a critiquer, 97% of the people who keep going back to revise and claim it's because they're "perfectionists" are really afraid of finishing. Because if they ever finish, they have to take the next steps, and someone might reject them. Fear of failure keeps them from finishing, but they pretend (often even to themselves) that it's because they're perfectionists.

Perfection is for final drafts, not first drafts. You won't reach perfection until you have a draft on paper to perfect.

Commitment

How badly do you want this?

That is a question each individual must ask and answer for him or herself.

There's nothing wrong with writing on the side, or writing only because you enjoy it, not because you plan to make it your career. It's simply a different approach.

If writing is to be your vocation as well as your passion, it must be a priority. There are no excuses, there is no such thing as "no time to write". You re-shape your life and people in it with those who will support your work.

That doesn't mean surrounding yourself with people who only pamper and praise you. Constructive criticism is important. Nor does it mean you get to be selfish and never consider the needs of anyone else in your life. But it means having people in your life who respect your needs and your boundaries.

If you want it badly enough, you make the changes in your life necessary to make it work.

If you don't, take responsibility for that choice and act accordingly. Don't blame others, and don't use friends and family as an excuse because you don't have the courage or commitment to go for it. Say, "This was fun, but only a hobby." There's nothing wrong with making that choice.

Longhand or Computer?

I still prefer to write first drafts in longhand. I think better in longhand, and it requires fewer revisions.

However, for something like Nano, I work on computer, simply because it's too much to write 2500 words and then type it up right away.

I find each piece "decides" if it wants to be handwritten or computer-written first.

And I carry my notebook around all the time to jot down scenes and ideas.

Music

I like to write to music.

However, when I write, it needs to be instrumental, or the lyrics distract me.

One of my favorite procrastination techniques is to create Character CDs – a CD for each of my main characters, filled with the music to which I think that character would listen.

I'll play it before I write about the character; or, if it's instrumental, while I write about the character.

My second year of Nano, writing the romantic suspense novel *Assumption of Right*, I told the tale in chapters from alternating points of view. Each day's chapter was from one or the other's point of view. So I'd pop in that character's CD, listen to it for a few minutes, and I'd be in the right mindset to write.

PART TWO:

**30 TIPS FOR 30
DAYS**

Day 1: And We're Off!

Are you in your first frenzy, as exciting as falling in love? Or are you paralyzed and panicked?

Just remember – words on paper. That's what counts.

Set down a word. Invite a friend for the word. Pretty soon, it's like the Pied Piper, one following the other!

Day 2: Recover and Keep Going

Have you recovered from your first day?

I want to keep going, past that first chapter. When it goes well, I want to go with the flow, and “write myself out”. However, I don’t want burn out, so I make myself stop. Usually the most I’ll allow myself in a single day is 5K.

My goal is to do one chapter per day. It takes me between an hour and a half and two hours to do the pages for the day, so I’m factoring that in to my daily life.

I try to get a bit ahead in the early days to give myself some breathing room.

The point of Nano is to keep moving forward. Track changes – either in your manuscript in a different color, or as one of my adoptees suggested, in Power Point. That way, you don’t lose ideas, but you keep moving forward.

I catch myself in some of my usual bad first draft habits. I overuse the word “just”. I’m aware of it, but I’m not going to stress about it until the next draft, when out comes the Red Machete. If it’s important to a particular character’s speech pattern, I’ll leave it. Otherwise . . .out it goes. One year, I caught myself using the word “entice” a bit too much – time to get out the thesaurus!

Day 3: Distractions

Click, click, click go the typewriter keys. Scratch, scratch, scratch goes the pen on the paper, when I'm writing away from my desk.

Somehow, we move forward.

Now, my big challenge is not to get distracted by interesting secondary characters. I like large, ensemble casts. But some pieces need to keep a tight focus. Sometimes, it doesn't think it will work if I sprawl and then cut back.

And today's biggest challenge was to keep the internal editor from banging down the door. Every few sentences, I kept thinking, "I'm going to have to change this." But I kept going, because it's the polish that the changes will add, not the basic plot and character development.

When the internal editor starts annoying me, I send her on vacation to Tahiti for the month, promising we'll do good work together when she returns in December. If she bothers me during the month, I say, "Aren't you supposed to be on a beach in Tahiti? See you in December!"

Having that conversation with that other part of my psyche helps me keep the focus where it needs to be for these thirty days – on the writing.

Day 4: Discovery

Nano is always a discovery of the creative process for me – and sometimes it has nothing to do with the current Nano!

Notice techniques this month, both that work and don't work for you, and see how you can apply them to the writing you do outside of Nano.

Day 5: Keep Ahead of the Pace

I got some scribbling done in the notebook, and because I got ahead of myself this week, I could ease up today and not worry about a slower pace due to physical and mental fatigue.

So, whenever you have a chance to do a few pages or even more words than your daily goal, grasp it and build yourself a cushion for the days when life gets in the way.

My personal goal was to hit 12,500 words by today, and I've fortunately passed it. I'm going to push hard again on as many days as possible this week, with a hope to hit 25,000 words by the 10th. Again, this is more than necessary, due to the fact that I prefer to hit 50K by the 20th of November, and relax for Thanksgiving.

Day 6: Speed

Should you write as fast as Nano demands?

For this one month, yes. No excuses. For the rest of your life, it is probably not a good idea.

Nano offers you a way to experiment, to test your commitment, to get your butt in that chair every day and strive for a quantity that seems rather silly sometimes.

Once you get it down on paper, you can rearrange it and make it pretty. But, for this ONE MONTH, even if you never write at this pace again – push yourself. Challenge yourself. Go beyond your self-imposed limits. And just do it.

Thousands of people ran the New York City marathon. This is a marathon of words.

It's probably unhealthy for most people to write steadily at this pace all year round. But the process of doing it at least once in your life will lead to interesting discoveries that will help you when you find your own, sane rhythm.

So yes, for one month, get out of your own way and push yourself beyond what you think is your endurance.

And see what you end up with.

Quantity over quality can be very frustrating – especially for first years. I'm less frustrated each year than I was in the first year.

But it definitely lingers, and, at least once a day, I think to myself, “whatever am I going to do with this big fat mess?”

Shape something out of it, once all those words are vomited out.

But get them out there. It is one month, four weeks, out of your life. You have the rest of your life to write at a slower pace.

For one little month, push. See what it's like. See what it's like to go beyond your resistance, to go beyond what you think is your endurance. Learn from it. See what you can apply to the rest of the year. Jettison the rest. But at least experience it.

There never will BE time. You MAKE it.

Day 7: Competition

The only person you're in competition with during this month is yourself.

Sometimes that's difficult to remember when you look around and see higher word counts. On some of the forums, I see that some of our fellow travelers have cracked 20K and upwards already.

Good for them.

I'm pushing myself early in the month because my personal need is to finish by Nov. 20 in order to be able to relax for the holiday. I'm getting a good daily word count in there, but I'm well aware that, at any point, I could hit a wall.

And then I'll have to figure out how to:

Climb over it

Burrow under it

Plow through it

Go around it

Blow it up

One of the most positive aspects you can take away from Nano, even if you never try to get this many words into such a short space again, is that, for one month, you had enough self-respect for your writing to sit down every day and do something.

If you can take that beyond this month, you'll have won, no matter what your final word count.

Day 8: First Week/Inspiration for the Weary

This is the one-week point of Nano. You've survived an entire week! Woo-hoo! Congratulations! Have I told you recently how proud I am of you? I am – very, very proud.

The second week of Nano is difficult because that's when you tend to hit a wall. The fresh bloom of love sometimes passes in the project, and it becomes hard work. And sometimes that's what writing is – work. You push through the tough parts until you reach another place where it flows and you get that inky high again.

Here are some of my favorite books that I read over and over again when I start having trouble putting words on the page. I don't use any of them as the be-all and end-all, but I use bits and pieces to help fuel me:

MAKING A LITERARY LIFE by Carolyn See

ESCAPING INTO THE OPEN by Elizabeth Berg

SOMETIMES THE MAGIC WORKS by Terry Brooks

WRITE AWAY by Elizabeth George (my process is soooo different, but she has some good ideas)

THE RIGHT TO WRITE by Julia Cameron (the only one of her books I like)

THUNDER AND LIGHTENING by Natalie Goldberg (the best of her writing books, in my opinion)

Any of the Paris Review interviews edited by George Plimpton

There are plenty of other writing books worth reading, but these are the ones I go back to, time and time again, when I get tired.

Day 9: Go With the Flow of Your Novel

So, we're into week 2 now.

Hopefully, you've started trusting your characters, and you can keep self-doubt at bay. It's a case of just sit down and do as many words as you can each day. Keep moving forward.

This is the point where, in year 2, my book switched genre.

Should I be able to re-impose the structures of the original genre on the rewrite, I will. If it doesn't work, I'll let the book be what it is.

Right now, I have to let the book be what it is. I have to trust in it, and in my subconscious. Yes, ultimately, we are the god in the process – we are the creative beings who manipulate and make the decisions in our fictional worlds. But when we consciously try to control too much, we often shoot ourselves in the foot (or in our collective feet).

Letting go, going with the flow, trusting the characters isn't about losing creative control – it's about getting in touch with the part of your subconscious that knows what will work better than you do.

So trust it.

Day 10: Daily Pace

2500 words/day, my personal goal, is not comfortable. “Comfortable” for me, is a steady pace of about 1500 words a day.

In order to achieve my goal during this month, I’ve had to push myself. That’s good, because it makes you stretch and grow. It’s bad, because too many days in a row past the comfort zone can wear you out.

In daily life, when you’re writing away from Nano, find out what you feel is a comfortable pace, and set that be your goal every day. Whether it’s pages or word count, find your personal flow. Make that your commitment to yourself -- you are going to write X pages per day. And do it. If the writing is going well, keep going. If it’s a struggle, work your way through the struggle and don’t give up until you reach the goal.

Day 11: A Day Off

Today's supposed to be my day off from Nano. I'm going out of town to play for the day.

I got nervous about getting behind (even though I'm ahead), so I started a chapter last night, and did 1533 words, which counts to today's word count. I hate stopping in the midst of a chapter, but I did. My two characters are tired and cranky and annoying each other and that's where I've left them, for now. After all, I didn't expect them to have this particular argument in this particular spot, but they are!

I love it when my characters surprise me. I love the joy of discovery inherent in writing. If I already knew every detail before I started, I couldn't write the book. It would no longer interest me.

Don't forget to back up your piece, or, if you're writing in longhand, to start typing NOW in order to be able to upload it for verification. And, when you put together the file for upload, it has to be a single file, not a folder with each chapter in a separate file. I have my floppy with each separate chapter on it; I have the print out of each chapter as I finish it; and I have a single folder with all the chapters in one document on the hard drive, which is what I'll use to upload for verification.

I'm notorious for my computer problems, so I'm doing whatever I can to make sure that I don't suddenly find myself on Nov. 29 with a lost project!

Remember, this is the most difficult week of Nano. Don't give up! Just sit down and write every day, even if it's only a few words.

And don't be afraid to give yourself a day off when you need it!

Day 12: Stuck

I didn't want to today.

I did not want to get my butt in that chair and work on my novel. No matter which year!

I slept in. I barely had enough coffee to make one big Nano-cup. I was still full of yesterday's playfulness (and the 52 books I bought at the second hand bookstore).

I didn't want to.

The first 113 words were such a slog, I thought I was going to have to sit there until midnight.

And then, pushing on, it got easier and easier.

In year 2, there was the argument I left the characters in yesterday to resolve, the tension to rise between them, the attraction rising, and then an action scene with an attacker. So there was plenty to do.

Today, I set up for a bit of B-line story in the next chapter or two.

The bulk of the action of the novel takes place over the course of three days. So my characters have a very long night ahead of them.

The point of this little piece is that there's plenty of resistance to sitting down and doing the work. But once you get through the first couple of hundred words, you re-enter the world of your story, and it gets easier.

So, on the days when you don't want to, do it anyway.

On the days when the first hundred words seem to take a hundred hours, keep going.

And you'll get there.

If you feel like you're stuck, throw them a curve ball. Have something happen to them, have a character come in, one who doesn't seem like it has anything to do with anything. And see how the characters respond. That will give you a lot of information, even if you end up cutting the scene in future drafts.

You're not going for publication in this draft. You're learning about your story and your theme. You'll go back and polish in the drafts – and there will be more than one – you do when you're done with this one.

Day 13: Working Beyond Nano

Something I want to take with me, post-Nano: Write the 1500 words/day on what I call my “Primary Project” – the piece that needs the bulk of my attention – each morning before I start my day.

If it’s flowing well, I’ll keep going until I’m written out for the day. If it’s a struggle, I’ll stop at 1500 –but I’ve met my goal for the day.

We all write for different reasons. This is my life’s work, my vocation as well as my passion – so I need to develop techniques to get the work done even on the bad days.

There’s nothing wrong with being an occasional writer. You’ll have a different type of career then, that’s all. There’s nothing wrong with not having this as your career. But, if you want it badly, the way I do, you make it happen, you don’t wait for it to happen

What is your goal for your work outside Nano?

What are you learning about yourself and your process?

These are important questions, and the answers can carry you far beyond November 30.

Day 14: Priorities/Reality Check

In year two, during my first week of Nano, a colleague of mine at the theatre was diagnosed with liver cancer and given two weeks to live. He died during my second week of Nano. I found out right after I finished my Nano pages for the day. He was only 48, and the theatre is a dimmer place without him.

When mortality slaps you in the face, you reassess. You have to figure out what your priorities are, and what you need to do to keep them in the forefront.

Writing is my priority, and, therefore, I plan my life to support the writing, not the other way around. If it doesn't add to my life in a way that makes me a better writer, and allows me to use my best energy of the day for writing, it's eliminated.

Every person must answer the question for himself, and sometimes, over the course of time, the answer changes. But knowing how important the work is to you helps you get it done.

Some days start rough, but then flow. At the end of the chapter, I was ready to go on.

Happy writing! And even if you're behind where you think you should be, don't get discouraged. Just do as much as you can. Every day.

Day 15: Week 3/Half-way point

Welcome to the start of Week 3!

The third week is both more difficult and easier than the previous two.

Hopefully, you're far enough into your story so that you're getting out of your own way.

However, there are two more types of resistance you may face this week:

If you're on count, you'll be tempted to take time off because you're ahead of yourself. Don't fall into this trap. Keep on pace. You can ease up once you've hit 50K.

If you're behind, you're likely to say to yourself, "I'll never make it anyway, so why bother?" Don't fall into this trap, either. Simply do as much as you can. Every word is a word more than you had before. Eventually, the words all add up.

What if you've hit this point and you truly hate what you've written? To the point where you can't continue?

Then start something else, but for the purposes of Nano, combine both into your word count. Split it up into separate projects later. Or, you might surprise yourself and find out that they actually do work together and are part of the same project.

The point of all of this is to keep writing.

This is where I hit the point where I resent every minute I spent away from the manuscript. Real life is nothing more than an annoyance.

Until I sit down at the computer. Then, I have trouble again. I almost skipped today, because I was ahead of my goal. But I didn't. Because every time you skip a day, or a series of days (which is different than a conscious day off), it's harder to get back to it. That's why so many professional writers emphasize the importance of writing every day. This doesn't mean you can never have a day off. It just means approaching the work each day as you would any professional job. Scheduling the time and meeting the page, whether you feel like it or not.

Part of Nano is finding out where writing sits in your life, and then restructuring things around it, if appropriate.

Happy Third Week!

Day 16: Comparison/Contrast Between Years

Since we're just past the half-way day count, it's time for more comparison/contrast.

In some ways, I found the second year easier than the first year. I was warned about "sophomore slump", but, although some days are more difficult than others, the second year flowed better. Let's hope I haven't jinxed myself!

Part of that is where I stood in my writing life. During the first year, I WANTED writing to be the priority of my life. The second year it WAS. I was further along in my transition from dual careers into writing full time. That's bound to help Nano.

Part of it how I structured my preparation for Year 2.

In Year 1, I got my idea in summer – July or August. I outlined it in a frenzy, did the historical research, and then didn't look at it for a couple of months until Nano started. Although I liked the idea, I was in the midst of other projects, and it was hard to make it a priority.

In Year 2, I got my idea in September. And I worked on it every day until Nano began, even just a few minutes reviewing notes, to make sure it was fresh and exciting to me on Day 1.

In Year 3, I played with three ideas during the month of September. One idea was a comic mystery, with whose premise I've played for several years. Then, in The Muse Online Workshops (where I both attended and presented), I developed material for two new novels. One of them grabbed me and wouldn't let go. I did a scene-by-scene outline, and that's the one I decided to pursue for Nano.

In Year 1, I set my quota, but there were days where I went far beyond it, writing myself into exhaustion. And then, I could barely squeeze out the words the next day. I forced myself to do it until I hit 50K, then only did 2 or 3K additional until the end of the month, and only sporadically worked on it after that.

In Year 2, I set my quota – 2500 words/day. If I want to go beyond that, I only allow myself to do so if it means finishing a chapter. And then I MAKE myself stop, and work on other things.

In Year 3, I plan to use the same quota system as Year 2.

I found it frustrating in a different way, but I don't feel the exhaustion and despair I often felt in Year 1. By the end Year 1, even though I hit the 50K goal, I never wanted to do Nano again.

Part of the reason I did it in Year 2 (in addition to wanting to socialize more with other participants) is that I wanted to see if I could create a different experience. Which is weird, because in Year 1, I tried to “make” certain things happen and was disappointed. In Year 2, I “let” them happen, even though I’m consciously trying to create a different experience, and it worked.

For Year 3, I’m taking a more business-like approach. I want the writing to be a playground, but I’m setting up a structure to allow me freedom within the next structure.

Will I do it next year? Don’t know. We’ll see how I feel on December 1, and then again, next October!

If you feel you’re behind in your word count at this point, don’t despair. Plenty of people need even tighter deadline pressure, and push hard during the last few days. If you’re ahead of yourself, don’t beat yourself up, but don’t slack off, either. You never know what tomorrow will bring, so building a cushion is always helpful.

Day 17: Unexpected Day Off

Sometimes, life gets in the way so completely – be it bad weather, mass transit, illness, that you're overtired and overwhelmed.

Again, don't be afraid to take a day off.

But make it a conscious choice. Don't say, "I don't have time". Say, "I'd rather deal with the rest of my life today and come back to the page fresh tomorrow."

Your approach will affect your writing, and you want to create as positive an atmosphere as possible.

Day 18: Breaking One's Own Rules

I broke one of my own rules. I went back and added an insert of several pages into a previous chapter. As I worked on the current chapter, I realized that a character I thought was a walk-on in Chapter 10 actually has a much more important part to play in the entire book. So I added a scene. I didn't rewrite what was there – I fleshed out a bit I'd skimmed over before. And that helped the current chapter.

The piece dictates the process, not the other way around.

But I did not EDIT material – I ADDED material. I changed direction a bit. There's a difference.

Had I gone back to EDIT, I would have sabotaged myself, doing second draft work within a first draft, and gotten stuck.

Day 19: Hitting the Personal Goal

In Years 1 and 2, I hit 50K on Day 19. I could pull back to a saner pace for the rest of the month.

My completion goal, I estimated to be around 100K in Year 1 and 85K in Year 2, so I still had plenty of work ahead of me, but I set a goal and I met it. And there's no feeling like it.

That's part of Nano – not only are you forced to ask yourself questions and turn your process inside out, you make writing a priority. You make a commitment, not just to the work, but yourself, and you stick to it. You stop treating it as a hobby, and treat it – and yourself – with respect.

When you respect yourself, others respect you.

How did I do it?

--I sat down and wrote every day. If I anticipated a day would be stressful, I worked ahead of my goal the day before. I took off two days consciously, in order to come back refreshed. I didn't just let them go.

--I trusted my characters and tried not to control everything to the nth degree. I let it happen instead of trying to make it happen.

--I did not worry about what "others" would think of the work, or care what a potential editor or reader would say. This is a first draft. This is for me, not for anyone else. Future drafts are shaped with an eye to "other", but unless it's on the page in the first place, it can't be shaped and it certainly can't be sold.

--I wanted it badly enough to do whatever it took to finish. Again, you ask yourself "How badly do I want this?", you answer, and you make your decisions from there. You are the only one who can decide where the writing fits into your life. There never IS time. You MAKE time.

Day 20: Keep Going

Keep writing. Keep working. If you're at a point where you don't want to put words on paper and are terribly far behind, work on something else. The important thing is to keep writing.

Being a writer is not about doing it when you feel like it. It's about doing it.

A writing colleague commented on a blog the other day, "You don't feel like writing? Boo fucking hoo." And that about sums it up.

In Year 2, I found it a bit harder, now that the pressure is off, to sit down and do the pages each day. However, once I got past the first half page or so, I fell back into the world of my story, and it gets easier and easier with every paragraph. So, push through the initial resistance and keep going.

Day 21: Lessons

What have you learned that will help you move forward?

With Year 2, I changed my routine slightly. In Year 1 and in the interim writing year between Nanos, although I “wrote in the morning”, I made my coffee, had my breakfast, checked my email, blogged, etc., etc., etc. before I sat down to write for the day. That “start” got later and later the following months, and it was more and more difficult to get down to it.

For Year 2, I decided to get up early and write my day’s quota BEFORE I did any of it. I feed the cats, make coffee, and sit down to write. Once my quota is done, I shower, eat and do everything else.

Let me make something clear: I HATE to write while wearing my pajamas. I want to be in “writing clothes”. I hate writing without showering. To me, it feels like part of last night.

But I’m more productive.

So I want to holdover that lesson from Nano, but maybe put the shower in first – shower while the coffee percolates.

But after feeding the cats, because nothing in this house happens if there are hungry cats!

And, in the interim between Years 2 and 3, I learned that if I complete my yoga practice before I sit down to write, I am much more focused and productive on the page.

The other thing I noticed is that, upon finishing the daily quota, I get depressed. I’m just warmed up. I want to keep going.

So I hope that moving the shower earlier in the process will negate the letdown. I do the quota on the “Primary Project” and then either keep going on it or switch to one of the other projects.

Nano is a learning process, and I want to take away ideas I can implement in my regular writing routine.

Day 22: Blocks

Blocks are ways to get in your own way. Whether it's self-sabotage or something not working in your story, blocks can turn into excuses. Don't let them. If you need to write four pages, you sit down and you write them. If your characters aren't talking to you, write about your character. Or write about a character or situation from a different character's point of view. Or, if you're writing in third person, write a scene in first person through a character's eyes.

Will it stay in your final draft? Probably not. But it will get you thinking and seeing from a different perspective, and that can be helpful when you feel stuck.

The most important thing to do when you're blocked is not to stop. Not to say, "I'm blocked" or "I can't." You bust through it and keep going. It may take you someplace you never expected in your piece and that can be a good thing. It may eventually lead you back, or you may find you have a completely different piece.

If you try to play God too much in the first draft, control too much, you shoot yourself in the Creative Foot. The less you try to force it, the better it will flow. That sounds like the opposite of "sit there and make yourself do it" but it's not. Creative Constipation can be broken if you stop trying to play God and remember to just play.

Day 23: Final Week

We are in the final 7 days of the process.

Look back.

Have you reached your benchmarks?

If you missed one, did you make up for it?

Have you learned something, even if it's that a way you tried working didn't pan out?

Start formatting the manuscript for the upload now. Place it into one RTF file. As you keep working, upload the new material into the file at the end of every work session.

Back it up. Multiple times.

Even if you're behind where you want to be, start this process NOW. Don't wait for the last minute.

And keep writing.

Day 24: Other People/Boundaries

One of the most important gifts to yourself, in Nano and in your writing life beyond Nano, is to set strong boundaries and remove toxic people from your life.

There will always be people who don't wish you well, even if they say it's with your best interest at heart. If they have to say it, it usually isn't; it's usually self-serving.

Learn to discern who genuinely wishes you well and who is trying to sabotage you. Cut the saboteurs out of your life. If you can't, because you're related to them, at least limit your interaction.

If someone puts you down for writing, don't discuss your writing with that person. Period. If they try to pry it out of you say, "I'm sorry, I don't discuss work in progress."

You don't owe them an explanation.

Day 25: Balance

Life gets out of balance when you try to write 50K in 30 days. The writing is the priority.

If you plan on being a professional writer, you have to keep the rest of your life in balance. While you can take a month per year to only focus on writing, there are other areas of your life that deserve attention.

The trick is to keep your own writing time sacred, your own needs balanced with those who are important. You shouldn't be a martyr; nor should you expect anyone in your life to martyr themselves for your writing.

Negotiate.

Know when to compromise.

And when to stand firm.

And remember: Just because someone claims you are ignoring them or being selfish, doesn't mean you are. That person might be making unfair demands.

Step back. Take a breath. Look at the big picture.

Make your decisions, and most importantly, take responsibility.

If you don't write, the only person to blame is yourself. Don't use anyone else as an excuse.

Day 26: Planning the Next Steps

One draft never does it for me. I do as many drafts as the piece needs until I feel it is the best it can be.

So what steps does one take after Nano?

First of all, I'm a big believer in putting it away and letting it "rest" instead of diving right back to edit. In order to edit successfully, you have to be able to approach it as though it was written by someone else, and this is the first time you've ever read it. If you dive back in to edits, especially early in your career, it is less likely to happen.

I prefer leaving it for two months, although when I've been on deadline, sometimes it's been as little as two weeks. If you actually finish your novel by the end of November, the end of January is a good time to start editing (that's why I've always skipped Nanoedmo, because it starts at the beginning of January, and I think it's too early).

Work on another draft. Put it away again. Work on another draft. Maybe this time you'll have something you can show to your "Trusted Readers". Once you've received their feedback, let the comments sink in for awhile before tackling the next round of edits.

Also, remember, that the Nano forums remain open until just a few weeks before the next Nano begins – so you can maintain connections you made during this experience.

I hope you're racing to the finish line, but even if you're not where you feel you want to be, remember that: A) There are still a few more days until the end of the month; and B) you have more words on paper than you did when you started, and you're working along your own commitment to the work. And that's the important part.

Day 27: Finish

Even if you don't finish the novel in the 30 days, keep working on it past those 30 days.

Finish it.

Don't let it sit in a drawer, unfinished, draining creative energy from other projects.

Don't try to pitch it to agents or editors in unfinished first draft form.

Until you have an established track record, if it's not written, it can't be sold, and the words won't appear on the page until and unless you put them there.

I hope Nano's given you the chance to experiment, to make discoveries in your process, to set your own goals and commit to them, and, most of all, to respect your work and be true to it.

Day 28: So Close!

We're getting there! Are you excited? Are you happy? I hope this experience has been all those things for you.

In Year 2, I was so close to the end of the novel I could taste it. I wrote additional chapters outside of my usually scheduled writing time. I had only two more chapters to write.

If you're behind, this is your chance for a final push. Just dig deeper and do it. When I researched a hockey book a few years ago and asked the players how they kept going when the tank was empty, they said, "You just dig deeper."

You have it in you. It's simply a case of pulling it out and placing it on the page.

Day 29: Whom Can You Trust as A Reader?

Trusted Readers are your greatest resource.

I don't use family members or romantic partners as Trusted Readers. I want a more outside eye. My Trusted Readers are comprised of fellow writers I think are particularly suited to the particular project and one or two non-writers who are avid readers. They do not have a personal agenda to my work – they simply want to read something good. They will be honest without being cruel. They provide positive criticism that helps me make the piece better, and they catch my bad habits. They do not try to sabotage me to forward their own agendas.

Once I get their comments, I go back and do another revision, incorporating them, and then do yet another revision with more cuts.

Only then is the piece in shape to start the submission process.

That's my revision process. We each have to find our own. But the most important thing is not to try to submit something that's not the best it can be. And a first draft, especially one written in an atmosphere of "just do it" is not going to be ready to submit.

Day 30: Done!

This is it! Your final day of Nano. The day to make the big push if you need to, or the day to simply pause and celebrate if you've hit the Nano goal.

If you haven't finished your piece, no matter where you are in relation to 50K, please don't stop after today. Please keep going until you have a first draft that's done. If you write only 1000 words/day, as novelist Carolyn See recommends in her wonderful book *MAKING A LITERARY LIFE*, you'll be amazed by how quickly the pages stack up.

Once you're done, let it rest before going back to edit.

In the meantime – write something else, if being a writer is your goal, your path, your passion, and your vocation. Take what you've learned from this experience and apply it to the next piece.

I hope you have learned. I hope Nano's freed up your process and given you a fresh perspective. I hope you've met some good people and had a good month.

In Year 2, I pushed through on the final chapter of *Assumption of Right*, and finished the novel. The feeling of satisfaction of not only hitting the Nano goal, but finishing the piece is enormous, as is the relief.

And tomorrow, I will take what I learned from Nano, write at least 1500 words before I start my day, and move forward.

NOW

CELEBRATE!!!

Links and Things:

For more information on Devon Ellington and her work, visit:

Ink in My Coffee: the blog on the ups and downs of this freelance writer's life:

<http://devonellington.wordpress.com>

The main website:

www.devonellingtonwork.com

The business writing site, which includes information on private coaching, manuscript critique, and workshops:

www.fearlessink.com

To sign up for “Devon’s Random Newsletter”, a monthly-ish email with tips and news on latest releases, workshops, etc., send an email to newsletter@devonellingtonwork.com. Make sure you put “subscribe” in the header so you don’t wind up in the Spam Box.

For “The Literary Athlete” column, hop on over to *The Scruffy Dog Review* – also a potential market for your work – and look around.

<http://www.thescruffydogreview.com>.

Happy Writing!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Devon Ellington publishes under a half a dozen names in both fiction and non-fiction. Her work has appeared in publications including *FemmeFan*, *Toasted Cheese*, *Hampton Family Life*, *The Scruffy Dog Review*, *Emerging Women Writers*, *The Rye Sound Shore Review*, and the anthologies *Perfectly*

Pum! and *Full Circle*. She writes “The Literary Athlete” column for *The Scruffy Dog Review*. She teaches a variety of workshops, including a Dialogue Workshop, does manuscript critique, and one-on-one writing coaching.