

SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE WRITERS

BY DANNY HEITMAN, FORUM EDITOR

In 1989, author Stephen R. Covey made a big splash with a self-help book called *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. It's still in print many years later, a testament to the appeal of summarizing the mastery of large ideals, like personal success, within a handful of steps.

This made me wonder if it might be useful to identify seven habits of highly effective writers.

You might have your own ideas on the subject, but here are mine:

KEEP A NOTEBOOK. Jot down your ideas as they arrive. It's easy to forget things, and recording them this way is a helpful habit. Recording small details – something interesting you see on a walk or a funny snippet of conversation – can become the basis for a piece of writing later on.



READ YOUR WRITING OUT LOUD. Most writing is meant to reflect human speech. Reading it aloud can help alert you to awkward turns of phrase or overly long sentences. Not all writing is meant to be measured this way. William Faulkner, for example, was famous for his serpentine prose. But for most of us, reading our writing out loud is a great way to spot defects.



WRITE EVERY WORKDAY. Writing is a muscle, and it's best to exercise it regularly for best results. Many writers are at their desk seven days a week. I usually give myself the weekend off.

HAVE A WRITING FRIEND.

Cultivate at least one friend who can read your writing and offer honest feedback. Some of us are lucky to have a trusted editor, while others rely on a spouse. A fellow member of a local writers group might be your best option.



BE OPEN TO CRITICISM. Writing is meant as a conversation between a writer and a reader. If an early reader points out problems, give their feedback a thoughtful hearing. We're often too close to our own writing to be completely objective about it. Good writers generally don't go ballistic about constructive critiques.

CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE. Writing often fails when writers don't keep in mind the readers they're trying to reach. If you're addressing an audience of nonscientists, for example, it's probably best to steer clear of technical jargon.

A story aimed at 6-year-olds will obviously be different from one intended for adults.

READ. People who want to master basketball watch NBA games to see how it's done. Medical students spend lots of time in the company of doctors to learn the ropes. To learn how to write, read often, and sample a rich variety of poetry and prose.



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he's taught writing to university students.