

Are You Achieving Your Writing Goals?

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By Mridu Khullar

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At the start of this new year, like at the start of every other new year, I came across dozens of articles about the importance of setting achievable goals, challenging myself to do new things and fixing measurable standards and working towards them.

But what happens when you mess up the goals from last year? Where's the real advice about missed deadlines and lost goals that all but kill the inspiration to come up with new ones? I didn't achieve three out of the ten goals I had set for myself last year, even though I was obsessive-compulsive about looking at them each day and measuring my performance regularly. I'm tempted to say that life got in the way or blame the shift in priorities that happened mid-year. But these are things that can and will happen each year. Instead of putting your life on hold the year when the strains and stresses get too much, plan your goals accordingly right at the beginning.

If you didn't meet some of your goals last year, here are some questions that you need to answer honestly, so that you do this time around.

Are you actively pursuing your targets?

It doesn't work just to look at your goals each morning and then do nothing about them. Sure, that's a good start and it means you're conscious of where you are in your career, but if you want to move further, you need to create an action plan. Instead of just making yearly goals, make monthly, weekly, even daily ones and then try and meet them.

Also important is to work towards what you want to achieve step by step. One of my goals last year was to get published in Reader's Digest. Guess how many query letters I sent them?

Two.

You're laughing, aren't you? I'm cringing. That's because I know that two queries just doesn't hack it if you're targeting such a high-level publication. Two queries wasn't even enough to get into my local newspaper; how's it going to land me a national assignment? If I had been serious about getting into

Are You Achieving Your Writing Goals?

RD, I would have read every issue, sent a query each month and built a personal relationship with the editor. Yet, I did none of those things. Not surprisingly, my goal remained unfinished at the end of the year.

Are you being honest with yourself?

In my first year of freelancing, I earned over a 100 published credits. That's because my aim was to reach this number, without caring about the money that came in. That meant that I wrote for low-paying publications, publications that paid in kind instead of cash, and on topics that I had absolutely no interest in. The next year, I shifted my focus to cracking the nationals and making a decent income from my work. But here's where I went wrong: I assumed that since I had already proven that I could

write a 100 articles in a year, I'd be able to do a repeat performance. But national magazines require much more research, very specialized queries, and a great deal of more effort per article. So while my goals of getting into national magazines and increasing my income were met, my goal of getting another 100 credits wasn't.

Are the goals really yours?

I think almost all of us get sucked into aping the tactics of someone we admire at one point or the other. The thought process then works something like this: If she could write two children's books, pen twenty greeting cards, author three non-fiction titles and syndicate a humor column in her third year of freelancing, why can't I? Never mind that I'm not really that into children's writing and I haven't said anything remotely funny since I was 10.

I'm ashamed to admit that I've been guilty of doing the above. It's easy to look at goals of other writers and think, "She's got so many goals for the year and I've got only five. Let me increase mine, too." But "she" doesn't have your life, and you don't have hers. So set goals that are appropriate for your career and your ambitions, not hers.

What's your life like?

If you're a new mom, don't expect to be able to work 80-hour weeks like you did before you gave birth. If you have a full-time job, don't try to take on same-day deadline assignments. You need to set goals that are suitable to your life, your speed and your talent, no matter what anyone else may do or say.

It's also important to incorporate life changes into your goal-setting. I lost two grandparents this year, which not only forced me to take a physical vacation from work, but an emotional one as well. I needed to give myself time to heal in order to get back to work refreshed and with new vigor. If you're going through stressful times, don't expect yourself to be as productive as say, when you're having a great year. Cut down on your goal list a little and be easy on yourself. Making yourself work too hard when you're not physically or emotionally ready to, will not help you meet your goals; instead it'll detract you from them.

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Are you confusing your long-term and short-term goals?

Writing a novel is my long-term goal. A "someday." But I'm not there yet. And I know I'm not going to be able to work on my dream novel this year, next year or maybe even the one after that. If I do, I'll be taking time away from the non-fiction work that pays the bills and for the next couple of years, I can't afford to do that. Putting "write a novel" on my list of goals for the year isn't going to make me feel too good about myself, especially as this goal gets carried forward year after year. Instead, I'm putting it on my "to do before I'm 30" list. That way, it's not too near, and it's not so far away that it becomes a distant dream instead of reality.

Once I've cracked a good number of national magazines, finished and published a couple of non-fiction books and can afford to take time away from non-fiction, I can consider taking a risk with fiction.

Are you keeping track?

The biggest problem I face right now is keeping track of where all the time went. While to an outsider it may seem like I'm working almost all the time, the truth is, I waste a lot of time on e-mail, reading

newsletters, networking with fellow writers and well, checking e-mail.

To counter this problem, I started keeping a daily journal to keep track of where my writing time was really going. My productivity's almost doubled since I started doing this. Keeping an hour-to-hour or even a daily tab of what I'd achieved for that day kept me accountable and ready to tackle the next important task on my list, rather than checking e-mail one more time. And if an entry for a particular day reads, "Revised article for Wedding Dresses, conducted research on a new idea," I'd immediately know that I needed to increase my productivity, and by how much. Sure, checking e-mail is work too, but it's not bringing in any money. So I make it secondary work and answer incoming mails only once a day, unless they need urgent attention.

Are your priorities straight?

Which brings me to my next point. Set your priorities right and work top to bottom. A technique that works for many people is to make a daily list of things that need to be done. Then, in the order of priority, tackle them one by one, striking them off the list. At the end of the day, even if you have some work unattended to, it can easily be transferred to the next day's list, since it'll be at the lowest priority.

Do you have a fixed schedule?

I still struggle with this one, but each time I'm able to set a schedule for myself, I find that I'm happier, more energetic and much more productive. Getting up at six in the morning one day, not sleeping for another two days and then getting a whole lot of slumber on and off for the next three days eats into your energy and taxes your brain much more than it should. It also becomes a cause for unnecessary delays and interruptions. Instead of surrendering to your muse whenever it shows up, program your body to work for a fixed time each day. Your brain will automatically recognize that as time to work and get on the job. Make your routine consistent. When our body gets used to doing something at a particular time, we're able to do with ease. So if you've decided to write five pages each morning

Are You Achieving Your Writing Goals?

before the kids get up, make sure to do it.

Answer these questions honestly and get to work on these techniques. You'll find all your goals ticked off your list by the end of this year.

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3 Tips to Achieve Your Writing Goals

By Shery Ma Belle Arrieta-Russ

1. Make your goals achievable.

By achievable, we mean realistic and attainable. You might unconsciously have set a goal even others will have a hard time achieving, even if they had the means and the time to do so.

Here's what you can do: break down your goals into small, realistic goals set against reasonable time frames. Oftentimes, you'll achieve your bigger goals if you work on achieving the smaller goals leading to those. The important thing is making your goals as realistic and as achievable as you can.

2. Devise a feasible plan.

You know what you want, but do you know how to get what you want? Do you need technical or artistic training to achieve your goals? Or perhaps further studies? Do you have a set plan of action that will lead to the achievement of your goals? What things, both tangible and intangible, do you need to aid you in reaching your goals?

Take a moment to sit down and list the things you need and make your action plan. This is a good time to break them down into small, realistic goals and then tackle them one day at a time!

3. Resist spreading yourself too thinly.

Sometimes, it's better to work on one goal at a time, rather than doing and shooting for so many all at the same time. Work on so many goals at one given time and you'll find out you're nowhere near achieving even one goal. You won't be able to focus your full energy on one goal.

Prioritize your goals and start with either your top priority or your most realistic goal. You'll discover you're able to do more and achieve more using this approach.

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Shery is the creator of WriteSparks! – a software that generates over 10 *million* Story Sparkers for

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