

"Write drunk, edit sober" Hemingway supposedly said. You can take the advice literally, but there's a moral here for all writers: separate your writing and editing. I think about it as: Write, walk away, edit.

Jeremy Porter 11/15/13 5:44 PM
Deleted: " is something ... [1]

When I sit down to write there's usually a lot I would like to say. Until the words make it to the page the ideas rattle around in my head, endlessly distracting me. Once I get the words on the page there's a release. And there they live until I return to it. The distraction is gone.

Jeremy Porter 11/15/13 5:44 PM
Deleted: find that when I...write th... [2]

Our brains are amazing. Even before you get up to do something else the brain has begun the process of editing. It works away while we get on with other things. This is why we wake up with solution to yesterday's problem and have epiphanies in the shower. Walking away from your draft is the single best thing you can do to improve your writing. By walking away you are giving the brain the opportunity to find solutions to writing problems. Research summarized in the Scientific American tells us why:

Jeremy Porter 11/15/13 5:44 PM
Deleted: when we walk away from the desk our...brain has begun the proces... [3]

With the right kind of distraction the default mode network may be able to integrate more information from a wide range of brain regions in more complex ways than when the brain is consciously working through a problem.

Jeremy Porter 11/15/13 5:44 PM
Deleted: "...ith the right kind of dist... [4]

That clumsy phrase? The dull introduction? The mixed tense? All the problems you created in your first draft become more apparent when you keep your writing and editing separate.

For me, this is a no exceptions rule, even for the most urgent tasks. I mentioned in an article on writing press releases that you need to have your press release in journalists inboxes with 30 minutes of a breaking news story. A first draft of a press release should take no longer than 15 minutes. Anything longer than that indicates that the editing is interfering with the writing. It's all about words on the page. Then I take a short break. Two or three minutes is enough. It could be getting a glass of water, going to the bathroom or a quick walk around the block. My experience is that even a few minutes will make the final piece better. A day is better if you have the luxury. The ideal gap between writing and editing for me is one or two days. Another edit one or two days later improves it again.

Jeremy Porter 11/15/13 5:44 PM
Deleted: So when we write and walk away our brain is able to start solving a whole bunch of problems like phrasing, structure, syntax and tone because we are using more of our brains to solve these problems, even if we're not consciously thinking abo... [5]

There are some obvious things you can do to separate your writing and editing. Here's a few:

Go for a walk

- "All truly great thoughts are conceived while walking." - Friedrich Nietzsche
- Do some exercise: a run, yoga, laps at the pool

- Sleep on it
- Watch a film
- Listen to the radio or a podcast
- Read a book
- Make something to eat
- Move to another part of the house or office and edit something else already drafted

If you can, send the draft to a someone else for a quick edit.

How did I edit this piece? I wrote a draft at home on Thursday afternoon, edited it in a café on Friday afternoon. Here's the difference between them.

Remember: Write; walk away; edit.

Jeremy Porter 11/15/13 5:44 PM

Deleted: To get a sense of how edit here's an early draft and the final version of the Affordable Care Act/Obamacare op-ed I wrote a few weeks back. It's not markedly different but I think it provides an idea of where I cut, rephrase and add clarity.