



7 TIPS FOR WRITING NOVELS WHILE PRACTICING LAW

BY LISA M. LILLY

Okay, I admit it. One of the main reasons I applied for a summer associate position with Chicago-based Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal was that Scott Turow was a partner there. (Still is, though the firm is now SNR Denton.) It wasn't just that I wanted to meet him, though that crossed my mind. Mostly, I figured a firm that touted a novelist/lawyer in its marketing must be comfortable with attorneys who had aspirations beyond the law. In contrast, at the other big firm where I interviewed, a partner glanced at the one line on my resume about fiction writing and said, "You know, you won't have time to do that here." Points for honesty, anyway.

As anyone who practices knows, though, regardless whether a firm or company tends to hire lawyers with outside interests, juggling law and the rest of life is a challenge in itself, let alone pursuing another avocation. Also, writing one novel probably won't catapult you into making a living writing. I'm convinced after attending numerous writing conferences that almost every "first novel" is the third or fourth one the author wrote. And many published authors still don't earn enough to quit their day jobs (though I'm sure Scott Turow does). Below I've offered seven suggestions I hope will help you fit writing into your busy life.

(1) Create a Habit: In THINK AND GROW RICH, Napoleon Hill said, and I'm paraphrasing, you are what your habits make you, and you can choose your habits. Writing is a lot like working out. If you need to decide every day whether to write or not, often you'll opt to do something else, and you'll get a limited benefit from the writing time you do spend. But when it becomes a habit, the pages start churning out, and it feels great.

Keeping a regular schedule establishes the habit, even if the time is minimal, such as half an hour twice a week. What's important is that you write during that time. Even if you begin by typing something as pointless as, "I don't know what to write. What if I write about a duck?" Write about how stupid your ideas are, if you need to, write about your day, write about what's driving you crazy at work or at home.

Whatever you write, it will establish the habit. Once you have the habit, you can increase the amount of time you write, and the quality of what you write.

(2) Help Your Mind Generate Ideas. Often writers feel blocked not because they can't write, but because they haven't figured out what to write about. (No one really wants to write about ducks, though a few manage to do it well.) One beauty of being lawyers is our profession takes us into contact with all types of people, and we get to learn about – in fact, often are paid to learn about – their personal and business concerns. And writing can be good therapy. Partner driving you crazy? Kill him off in a story. Frustrated with developing new business? Imagine a client dinner that really turns into a nightmare. (As you might guess, my collection of urban horror tales was inspired by the ups and downs of working at a large law firm.)

But it's perhaps more important to get outside of work, especially when you're feeling burnt out or stuck. Recently, I was outlining the second book in my AWAKENING series. I knew my main character, Tara, would travel to Turkey and enter some type of cave to help decipher the meaning of prophecies about her. But I couldn't think of what she'd find in the cave. I needed something that would inform her, yet leave her puzzled and disturbed. One afternoon I attended an exhibition called Morbid Curiosity at the Chicago Cultural Center. (I like horror, remember.) In one room, children created from camouflage and gas masks played ring-around-the-rosy around a bomb. A week or so later, I saw a photo of a man standing beside a tank that had tires almost as tall as he was, and another photo of the inside of an army transport vehicle. These images – and others sparked by them – will find their way into Tara's vision. Much more interesting than a disembodied voice from on high or some cave drawings, which was all I'd previously come up with.

Usually the ideas don't come so quickly. But a visit to an art museum or an evening at a concert often triggers scenes or story ideas days or weeks later. Figure out what stretches or rests your mind and find time for that activity whenever you can.

(3) Buy Time. Even finding half an hour twice a week can be a challenge, and most of us need to write more than that, at least on the average, to finish a novel. (Though, if you think of it, if you write just 4 pages a week, that's 208 pages a year, which is 1/3 to 1/2 of a novel right there.) The obvious place to find time is television, social media, and video games. I'm always surprised how many television shows my lawyer friends, even those with kids, find time to watch, until I remember – they don't also write.

But if you're lean on recreational activities, look at work. The good news is that while being a lawyer often means working a lot of hours, it also means earning more than most people do per hour. Which means you can buy time. Examine whether you can afford to work less and write more. Some firms or companies allow reduced schedules for reduced pay. I did this for several years at Sonnenschein with mixed results. Sometimes I still ended up billing 1900-plus hours, just earning less. Overall, though, it did allow me to write more. Similarly, now that I've been in practice three and a half years, I've opted not to seek out new business to replace a couple major cases that settled because I want to write more and can afford to earn a little less.

If your firm or the nature of your practice won't allow cutting your work hours, you can buy time by outsourcing. With the advent of virtual assistants, flexible staffing agencies, and college students looking for ways to make extra cash, almost anything can be outsourced. This is especially wonderful when you can pay someone less than your time generates for you in the legal world. If you earn two-four times as much per hour at law than you would pay someone to clean your home, remodel your bathroom, grocery shop, do your taxes, wash your car, or keep your books, do what you do best, pay someone else to handle those other tasks, and use the extra free time to write.

(4) Harness Your Unconscious. Much of the creative process takes place behind-the-scenes. Even if you're extremely busy, your unconscious can come up with story ideas and scenes and flesh out characters. The key is to stimulate the unconscious without stressing out. One way I do this is to ask myself a question before I fall asleep or head to the office, such as "Where is the most unnerving place for Tara to be confronted by a stranger who claims to know the meaning of her pregnancy?" If I ask the question every so often, then put it out of my mind, eventually a scene or idea pops into my head. (In this instance, the scene takes place just before midnight, when Tara's alone and closing the Laundromat where she works.)

(5) Use Downtime. One of the things I love about TV law shows is how no lawyer goes to court and sits forty minutes waiting to give a status report. You also never see lawyers waiting at the gate when the flight to the deposition is delayed. In the real world, though, most of us spend some time waiting, often in circumstances where it's difficult to get any other work done. That's why I carry a legal pad everywhere and pull it out if I have more than five minutes.

I particularly like scribbling about characters, because if I'm cut off in the middle, it doesn't matter. In fact, my unconscious will probably keep going with the train of thought. Now and then I write snippets of dialogue or openings for scenes. While the legal pad pages rarely make their way to my writing desk at home, and the exact words almost never get typed into a manuscript, my thoughts flow more freely when I do have time. It's a big part of why I'm usually able to turn out pages as soon as I sit down to write.

I'm also a fan of writing vacations. At my old firm, on occasion I took a week off, claimed to be out of town on vacation, and stayed home and wrote for four or five hours a day. This uninterrupted time helped me knock out large sections of my novel, so I particularly recommend it when you already have a solid outline. Vacationing with friends or family makes it harder. But if you can find somewhere that features places your companions will go without you, take 2 to 4 hours a day in the hotel or at a Starbucks and write. Even if you need to check e-mail or take a work-related call now and then, you'll write more than if you were actually at work.

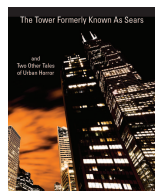
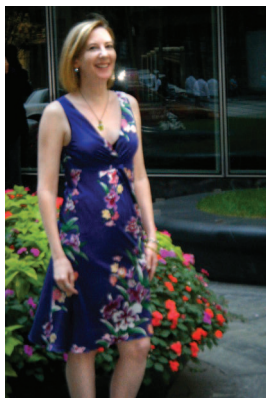
(6) Set Goals. Most lawyers are goal-oriented people. That's how we got through law school. Large goals, like writing a best-seller in two years, are inspiring, but easy to put off until tomorrow. So break those goals down. If you have a regular schedule, your first-draft goal could be a page a day or seven pages a week. If you have an erratic schedule, pages per month or even per three months works better. One of my instructors, author Raymond Obstfeld, called this latter approach the spare change method. Rather than writing X amount per day or week, you throw whatever you can into the writing equivalent of the spare change jar. So one week I might write 4 pages, the next 10, then next none, but at the end of the month, I've written 30 pages.

(7) Write Something Bad. If you've tried cases for twenty years, you might be able to think through an opening argument the night before trial and give it the next morning. But when you started out, you probably outlined the argument, practiced ten times in front of a mirror, and tried it out on a colleague or two. Yet, for some reason, many of us insist on trying to make every sentence of our fiction perfect the very first time. Hemingway said all first drafts are sh*t. I find this very freeing. Many of my first drafts are rambling or too sparse (or both) and include pages that ultimately don't need to be there. A first draft is a thing of beauty not because it's perfect, but because it's done. Trying to write well the first time out can keep you from writing at all. So the biggest key to starting – and finishing – a novel is being

willing to write something bad. Then you can revisit, rewrite, and polish all you want.

There's no magic to finding time to write, any more than there is to finding time to study in law school, or to raise children, do volunteer work, or care for your parents while practicing law. There will be things you'll miss while you sit and write, and carving out the time to write may mean, for a while at least, earning less than you could if you focused all your efforts on law. But if you love writing the way I do, it will be worth it. Much as I enjoy practicing law, nothing satisfies me more than finishing a piece of writing and feeling I've done my best with it. Oh, yes, and I did get to meet Scott Turow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lisa M. Lilly is an author and an attorney. Her first novel, *The Awakening*, is a thriller about a young woman whose mysterious pregnancy may bring the world its first female messiah -- or trigger the Apocalypse. She also is the author of *The Tower Formerly Known as Sears and Two Other Tales of Urban Horror*, numerous short stories and poems, and articles on legal and business issues. In her law practice, Lisa represents companies in appeals, class actions, and other business-related lawsuits. After her parents' deaths were caused by an intoxicated driver, she became a

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