

#PREPTOBER

Prepare to
Write a Novel
In One Month

COLE SMITH WRITES

So you've decided to do it.

NaNoWriMo is responsible for some of my best and worst times.

(Is that blame-shifting? Over-statement, maybe?)

Okay, NaNoWriMo is when I've written my best work...and my worst!

Once, I dozed off in bed with my wireless keyboard. The next morning, I read the most bizarre, rambling sentences. I cut them, of course, but they were so oddly poetic that I saved a few to an inspiration folder for later.

So much of NaNoWriMo is like that: digging for treasure and finding helpful relics instead. Perhaps even more precious than the riches we were expecting. It reminds me of the alchemists. Those guys were looking for some crazy stuff. Elixir of life, eternal youth, a substance that would transmute lead to gold -- nothing was too far-fetched or impossible.

What they found instead was a multitude of less-flashy but pretty darn useful discoveries. Some of those practical finds are things we use today, revelations that paved the way for amazing advances.

But eternal youth? Sorry.

Is it bananas to dare to attempt an entire novel in thirty days?

Absolutely.

But like the alchemists, the story you discover may be much more valuable than the one you had in mind. And in that spirit, I wish you luck. Remember: in my experience, the digging is just as important as the discovery!

-- COLE

Priorities

Writing a novel is a dream we've cultivated for a long time. And even if you're already an author, the dream of holding a novel of your own creation at the end of November is as fresh and enticing as ever. But life isn't all novels and lattes.

Other rich dreams and responsibilities clamor for our time. Set the timer for fifteen and jot down all the goals and values you count precious and important.

ALL OF THEM.

(Even going down each day to say hello to the toad in the basement. Long story.)

Sort and Order

Okay, now that we've listed everything that's important to us in life--let alone, November!--step away from your list for a little while so it can simmer on the back burner of your subconscious. (And if you didn't actually make a list because you thought it was dumb since obviously you know your priorities already, I really recommend you go back and do it now. Visualization can do wonders!) Go do a mindless chore or watch a few cat videos, whatever. I'll walk the dog.

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Okay, if you're like me, your brain coughed up one or two more priorities from your subconscious. Good, go ahead and throw those on your list.

Now, scan through all your listed priorities and number them, maybe with a different ink color. Make your top priority '1', your next most important priority '2', and so on. Number them all or until you're down to the things like "eavesdrop on others in grocery checkout line". (I know, it's for story ideas. But it's not worth numbering.)

Rewrite your top ten priorities in the box below:

Analyze and Organize

Ah, our lives in a small rectangle. Heavy, huh? Okay, enough existential wonder.

Is your novel in the top ten?

If it is, I hope you feel a thrill of excitement and the pull of its gravity.

This is big, baby. November. Whoa.

If your novel *isn't* in your top ten priorities, that's okay, too. One year, I started strong. I was determined. Then six days in, my grandmother passed away. It's a contest, not life or death. I thought about powering through and dedicating the novel to her. But I just couldn't do it. I needed to be elsewhere, thinking about other things, other people. Real people that I hadn't fabricated out of thin air.

Fragile people who are here for such a short time...

Some years are like that. And if this is a season of uncertainty or grief or just intense suck-itude, it's okay if your novel didn't even scratch your top *twenty* on the list. If you want to try and write your way out of a dark time, do it. If you want to curl up and seek the comfort of actual, not-fictional loved ones in your life, do that. If you just want to write along with us, knowing there's no chance you'll make 50,000 words, yes. Do it. You'll have a nice chunk of story that you didn't have in October. Totally worth it. Sometimes, NaNoWriMo is about being part of a mob of writers all focused on creativity and cheering others' victories.

Think it over. Listen to that voice in your heart. We're with you, whatever you decide.

If your heart rolled its eyes and told you to get on with it, take a close look at your top ten list. Are any of the priorities overlapping? Closely related? Do you have items like 'tidy house' and 'live simply'? If so, draw a line between those items. See any other connections or themes? How about making general items more specific. Break down 'family' into 'spouse' and 'kids'.

Make the Plan

Okay, ya'll, pull up your calendar. Doesn't matter which one, just so you use it. (I use my bullet journal, then transfer upcoming appointments and bric-a-brac to my phone's calendar app each Sunday. Whatever works for you.)

Look at the month of November.

What already staked its claim to your November? For me, it's Thanksgiving, and two required events at my school. Fill in your Must-Do's. Add in any birthdays or Like-To's. A like-to is something you'd like to do, but don't *have* to do. I'd like to take my cousins to see the lights display at our city park. But I don't have to, since we can go in early December instead.

Look at your priorities list.

Schedule time and attention that you will devote to your top five priorities in November.

If my top five are: parents, husband, cousins, faith family, school family, then I'll schedule time with all those people. (I didn't purposely make a point to choose people as my top five, but it's funny how that works out, huh? Something to remember...)

So I will make *scheduled appointments* to spend time with all five of those groups in November. And I'm going to spread the appointments out a little. In fact, I'm going to use all those precious people to bribe myself to crush my word goals. I'll plan fun outings or movie nights with my top five each weekend, knowing that I'll work extra hard during the week so I can feel great about relaxing with friends and family.

Yes, we're going to leverage time with our loved ones.

But it takes a lot of pressure off during November. You'll know that no matter how reclusive you feel, or how much you're neglecting "all the things", you're still making time for the most important ones in your life.

That's freeing.

The Stuff No One Likes

Now, with your calendar still in hand, figure out when you're going to do the other stuff. Housecleaning, repetitive errands, grocery shopping, paying bills, etc.

Is there anything you can cut?

Pretend your to-do list is a piece of writing. Can you edit out anything unnecessary?

Can you use an online grocery service and just to pick up your groceries on the way home? Some of these services cost as little as \$5, which many shoppers testify actually pays off in fewer impulse buys and forgotten items.

How about cleaning? Can you have a cleaning party at the end of October and leave all but the most minimal and necessary upkeep 'til December?

Speaking of December, can you get your holiday shopping done in October, or at least make your gift list ahead of time? I know -- crazy talk! But what if prepping for NaNoWriMo actually saved your sanity in December? Whoa.

Think about how your fall normally looks. How would your ideal fall look different?

Hate to stand in the cold at the Turkey Trot while you cheer for your brother?

Meet him for brunch afterward (and noveled at the cafe for an hour before he arrived)?

Would that be possible? Acceptable?

Let people know you're participating in a special challenge, one that requires you to arrange your time a little differently this year. Reassure them that you're not changing *all* the traditions, just tweaking one or two. When your loved ones find out what it means to you, they'll be happy to be flexible.

If you have a toxic family, do not tell them about your goal.

You know what they'll do: pull you down. Protect your dream and give yourself the November you deserve. Tell them you're too busy for whatever circus they've invited you to attend, and hide out somewhere with your novel.

About Self Care

I'm not going to pretend like NaNoWriMo is a hardship. It's a contest, and we chose to do it. It's not like having your shared family car blow up, or serious illness showing up without warning, or a disintegrating relationship or any other kind of real stress that people put up with each day.

That said, it *is* stressful, and it *can* wear you down.

You skimp on sleep and nutrition at your peril. (It's flu season, don't you know?) In order to take care of the ones who rely on you, you're going to have to take good care of yourself. Writing a novel doesn't mean you deserve a facial each week, but you certainly deserve enough sleep. If you take your work to bed with you, try to make sure it's paper, not digital. (I know, I just told you a story about taking my keyboard to bed with me--but not every night!)

After you've done your scheduling, go back and schedule at least one, 30-minute appointment each week in November to allow yourself to just sit and think.

Call it 'creative rest'. This is good for your brain.

And your brain will be happy, and reward you by unsnarling the rat's nest of a plot tangle you made in your novel. Does that sound manipulative?

Well, it's your brain, and there's no reason you both can't be happy.

Look up the NaNoWriMo events that will take place in your region, and attend those if you can. But don't let it be an excuse to procrastinate on your novel.

And most of all, treat yourself to a t-shirt or some other item from the NaNoWriMo gift shop. Not only will your purchase support an incredible event and hard-working staff, but it will be a promise you make to yourself before November 1st. Wear your t-shirt or drink from your mug all month, because you're livin' the dream.

Best of luck, friends.