

In the Classroom 145

How to "Win" at NaNoWriMo

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks ever so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things, but you're hanging out with me and I really do appreciate it. Right now, I am just finishing up my Thanksgiving break. This afternoon I'm heading out to the library to work on this fine Sunday, but this has been a successful month.

Yesterday, I successfully hit 50,000 words for not one, but two different projects for NaNoWriMo. Here are some of the lessons I learned along the way. If you remember back in Episode 140, I mentioned that I would be participating in NaNoWriMo. During two preview attempts at NaNoWriMo or the National Novel Writing Month, I failed to hit the 50,000 word mark while working on just one project.

I had to try something different and I hit it in two projects. I recognized from my two previous attempts that I could not find enough time during the day to craft my words by hand, by typing them out. This year, I switched to dictation and that made all the difference. What did I learn? Well, let me tell you. First, it starts with good preparation. I participated in what is called Preptober.

One of the lessons I learned was that I needed to prepare ahead of time by crafting an outline. Naturally, the more detail that you make it, the easier the words will flow when you start speaking. However, sometimes it's only one word that you need in order to get started. For one of my projects, my main project, I did not have enough outline throughout the month, I ran out. I almost failed to hit the 50,000-word count again and that was devastating.

Along the journey, I kept adding to the outline. I interviewed a couple folks what they thought about this topic and took some notes. I went through my books. Basically, I did the research and I kept adding to the outline. I would also pull it into Scrivener and chopped it up to look for areas where I can improve. The more work that you put into Preptober, the easier time that you're going to have at it.

The other lesson was, do not stop to edit, do not edit. Don't worry about the mess. The goal of NaNoWriMo is to craft 50,000 words, not craft 50,000 perfect words. You have 11 other months to perfect your writing. Now, if this is going to stress you out, then dictating probably is not the strategy for you, but I found it absolutely fascinating. I would just have my outline in front of me and I would take a word or a phrase and I would start speaking to that out. There was nothing to see other than I was using Audacity in order to write this.

I was just watching the time go by. Usually, when I hit around 20 minutes, that was time to stop. I gave each project about 20 minutes in two separate blocks and I was

hitting my word count pretty steadily and with ease until I run out of outline, then I would stress a little bit. Now, come next year, come December, I will go look at least one of my projects and see how it worked out.

As I mentioned, while you're writing, do not research. You ever when you're writing, suddenly you're like, "Oh, what's that quote again?" Then you start going down the rabbit trail of getting on the interwebs and trying to figure out what that quote was, don't worry about it. If you don't know something, just say the word TK. Give an approximation of what you're looking for or mumble a little note to yourself and then just move on. TK does not show up naturally in the language. That is something that will stand out to you later when you do a search.

Then you can do that research or when you're not writing or dictating, do your research. Go fill out your outline. Get all those things that you want to make sure are in there. Take time to do that. If you are working on a very formal project where you have to make sure that you are citing, then once again, this whole TK thing, you may mention that article or something like that. Do that.

Another thing that I did not do on the previous attempts that I did this time is actually, I pulled together a support team. I looked for other individuals, friends of mine, who are writers and who I thought would want to participate in this adventure. I pulled them together and we put together a little team and every day we would indicate what day it was and report out.

Everyone is on their own writing journey. My results and their results differ, but they had other goals. They announced these goals ahead of time. Some of them were experimenting. Some of them, this is the first time they're out there and they're challenging themselves. You're only in competition with yourself. What was nice is having that support, getting in and people cheering you on and you're cheering them on. That helped me, as much as anything, get to the finish line because yes, I wanted to be successful as much for them as for me.

With NaNoWriMo, I honestly believe that you need to craft a small part of your day every day to write, that trying to do it in mass, that will not be as successful in my mind. Because I crafted out time times during the day, every day, I was able to quickly meet my goal. The fact that I was dictating, and I only had to spend 20 minutes on a project, 40 minutes at a time, I did most of this at my lunch. I would go in and I would dictate two different files, dump those files into Otter AI, and it would kick out transcripts that I would take the word count from.

When I was not able to write at lunch, then I had to find time in the evening. I would find that time in the evening in order to knock out those two files. I always tried to knock out two files. Some days, I was not able to hit the word count for one. Maybe later I did another short file to hit the word count. There was only a couple days when I did not write at all. For the most part, I really tried to dedicate time every day.

I would say the individuals that were not able to do that, they're having a rougher go at it because they have to basically catch up in their mind. The other thing that I think was helpful, and it was helpful for me, is I went in and declared that I was

participating in NaNoWriMo on their actual website. Every day, I would go in and log my numbers. They had a nice little graph. They showed me where I was.

As they say, you do what you measure. I was trying to make sure I stayed ahead of the graph, above the graph. They had almost like a burn down chart to let you know where you stood. That's what I was looking at. Then I would report my results back. Most of the time, I would just tell my team that I either hit or exceeded my goal, or in the cases where I fell short, I let them know that too. I basically reported out. I told them where I struggled and I told them where I was successful. I shared strategies. That was a nice thing that everybody did, they shared strategies. That was quite useful.

Now, the dictating, this is what I found to be tremendously fascinating, is I got a glimpse into how my mind works. I would start talking. I had two projects. One was a formal, non-fiction project that I was working on. The other one was more memoirs, but it didn't matter. For both of them, as I started talking, my mind went into overdrive and I would just start pulling out memories and being able to add things. I would sit back in surprise and just like, "Wow, where did that come from?" It was just absolutely fascinating if you give your mind basically unbridled access to write what it will come up with.

If you have never tried dictating, it takes a little while to get into. I think working on this podcast has been useful because I do the same thing. I have certain bullets that I'm speaking to, but then I just start talking and I start adding to them. I think this has been a useful exercise in preparing for NaNoWriMo going into it, but what I was able to be able to pull out while writing has been fascinating.

Now for the memoirs, I have not looked at them yet. I have not chopped them up. I haven't done anything with that. I will be just as fascinated to read what I wrote as the other project. The other project, I chopped up a little bit because I was looking for opportunities. I saw a little bit of what I wrote and I'm overall pleased at what I can start with when I actually go to clean it up.

The biggest lesson, at the end of the day, is that this is doable. Like I said, in the past, I fell short on two separate occasions. I was not able to craft five pages every day, but with dictating, I easily did it and I still have a couple days to spare, but it's absolutely doable if you work on it every day. I recommend dictating because you can do it just that much quicker, especially if you're in a time crunch.

I was working my normal job plus I was also teaching a class, a grad class that had some major projects in it, and I had to make sure that I gave attention to them. I recognized the whole time constraint, but it certainly still was doable. Next year, we'll start talking about this way early. We'll start talking in September, Preptober, and hopefully, you can join me in NaNoWriMo in 2022. With that, talking about books, here's a quick plug for my book.