



Two Sides of a Coin: Attention Span & Focus

by Bobbi Linkemer

Some types of writing can be achieved in a relatively short time span. In advertising, for example, the bulk of a writer's effort goes on before the writing begins. Like an iceberg, hidden from view, the brainstorming and creative processes are unseen and can take more time than the actual act of putting words on paper ... or, more accurately, on computer screen. That part often seems to come in a flash of inspiration. "Eureka, I've got it," and The Pepsi Generation is born.

Such instances are the exception rather than the rule. The rule is that most writing takes time – lots of time. An article, a brochure, an annual report, a speech, a training program, a Web site, and, certainly, a book is not conceived in a single brainstorming session or written in a matter of hours. Any of them, as well as many other assignments a writer is likely to encounter, may consume weeks, at least, and many months at most.

Of the myriad strengths a writer needs, two of the most important are focus and a long attention span. Focus means total concentration or fixed attention on the project at hand. The above definition suggests that you are also very interested in this activity. You are immersed in the subject, to the point that you are almost one with it. It helps if you are one of those people who is incapable of boredom, because you will be asked to write about many things that would put the average person to sleep. If you're focused, you are, by definition, not bored. The trick is to stay focused; that is what is meant by having a long attention span.

The ability to get excited about a subject and stay excited is a rare gift. If you weren't born with this talent, I would strongly advise you to cultivate it. The question is, how do you do that? The answer is, with the right attitude. Let's use an article as an example.

There are a number of prescribed steps to putting together a good feature article, no matter what kind of publication it will appear in. They begin with the initial assignment and end with a final, approved manuscript. In between, there is the need to track down sources, conduct interviews and all other varieties of research; sort, absorb, and process the information you have gathered; write a first draft; spell check, revise, proofread, refine, do a final edit, rewrite; and, at last, send it off to the editor.

That's the best-case scenario. The worst-case scenario is when the editor or client wants it shorter, longer, more detailed, or completely different than the way you wrote it. At that point, you may find

yourself back at square one, virtually starting from scratch. In either case, it can be a real challenge to keep your interest and enthusiasm from waning or just plain dying. The secret lies in your attitude – the one element over which you have complete control.

Attitude is a conscious choice. You create it, you nurture it, you keep it alive through every step of the process, no matter how long it takes or how frustrated you may become. Here are the attitudes I have cultivated over time about each of the steps in the process.

- Initial assignment – a way to add to my store of knowledge or to learn something completely new
- Tracking down sources – a timed scavenger hunt
- Interviews; research – assembling a complicated puzzle
- Sort, absorb, and process – cramming for an exam (believe it or not, I enjoyed that)
- First draft – a state of “flow,” to borrow the words of author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
- Revising, refining, rewriting – going for the gold
- Sending it off – satisfaction, confidence, and relief
- Great reviews – sometimes, even better than money
- Not-so-great reviews – gratitude (honest!) for an opportunity to improve the product
- Back to square one – another chance to perfect the process (this is the tough one)

Does it really work? Most of the time, it does. Choosing the most productive attitude at each step of the process keeps me focused for as long as necessary. In a project like an annual report, that could be several months; for a book, it could be well over a year. As I said, it helps to be incapable of boredom.