



The Lonliness of the Long-distance Writer (or why you need endurance)

by Bobbi Linkemer

Writing is an extremely physical activity — something that never occurred to me when I started out. Thirty-five years ago, we didn't have computers; we were lucky to have electric typewriters. Mine was a little, blue Smith Corona portable. I couldn't afford an IBM Self-Correcting Selectric, which I coveted for years. I remember the feel of my fingers on the keys, tripping all over themselves; the sound of the bell that indicated the end of a line; and shoving the carriage so hard I thought one day it would fall off. Most of all, I remember sitting for hours on end.

I took great pride in being able to sit for up to 12 hours at a time, refusing to abandon my post until I finished whatever I was writing. By the time I did finish, I was in a pretzel knot from hunching over the typewriter, but I refused to give in. It was an endurance contest I always won, though; for the life of me, I don't remember how I did it or why it seemed so important.

Typewriters, of course, are now as obsolete as carbon paper, and the life of a writer supposedly has been made much easier by all of this fabulous technology. After all, we don't have to white out, correct, retype, pick up all that discarded typewriter paper, or half the things we used to do. The life of a writer should be a breeze. Yet, strangely, I find my work much more tiring than I used to.

It's a given that I've lived a few decades since those 12-hour days and that my hands have lost some of their former dexterity. But those things don't really explain the fatigue that is somehow different in nature from the "just plain pooped" I used to experience. Some of it is eye strain from staring endlessly at little type on a glaring screen; some of it is repetitive-motion pain because my hands and wrists seem to be doing the same things over and over again in a different way than when they hit typewriter keys; and some of it is the ergonomically incorrect height of my chair or my keyboard, how my back is or isn't supported, and on and on. The bottom line is that writers ought to join a gym or hire a personal trainer just to stay in shape to do what we do for a living.

Actually, I'm serious. Exercise is absolutely essential for those of who spend so much of our time on our derrieres, hunched over a keyboard, totally focused on stringing words across a computer screen. Why? Because it develops stamina, strength, and flexibility; clears the mind, calms the soul, and relieves stress; jump starts the creative process; releases endorphins; and brings balance to a highly cerebral vocation. It also feels good — for some of us, while we're doing it; for others, when we stop doing it. In any case, regular physical exercise should be mandatory.

Stamina and endurance apply to our minds as well as our bodies. In the kind of work that requires high-functioning mental and creative processes, no writer can afford fog on the brain. And that is a real danger when you're tired or stressed or have been working on the same thing for too many hours. How do you know when you are on mental overload and your brain has shut down? For one thing, there are physical clues. It may be a headache or the feeling that your head is swimming. Your eyes may refuse to focus or just close. You may begin to make more than your usual number of typing errors.

Equally important, yet more difficult to recognize, are the mental symptoms: your concentration begins to slip, and writing becomes more of a rockslide than a flowing stream (I know, for many people it is always a rock slide). You may lose your place or your enthusiasm. For me, the "knowing" comes when I realize that my writing has become mechanical. The minute I become aware of that, I stop, even if it's in mid-sentence.

Physical exercise is a tune up for the mind as much as for the body. It is rejuvenating, refreshing, and relaxing, all at the same time. There are many other ways to give your brain a rest, including listening to music, getting a good dose of nature, drawing or painting, cleaning the house, walking the dog, meditating, doing yoga or stretching, taking a nap, or simply staring into space. For most of us, doing nothing is the hardest thing in the world; but often that's all it takes to blow the fog away.

You need endurance and stamina to sit for hours, stay alert, and write well. It sounds prosaic, but the best advice is what you've heard a thousand times: eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly, get adequate sleep, and try to bring balance to your life. Your creativity and livelihood depend on it.