time staff writer for the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, says she's found a lot of advantages for writing in her office job.

"I spent a lot of years alone in a room with myself," she says, "and now that I'm out in the world, I find I have more ideas. I have learned about new parts of the world, and spent time with different kinds of people. I also feel more happiness and gratitude when I do get in that room by myself."

"I like the structure of the working day," Pastan says. "I used to have lots of tedious rituals I had to go through before I could start writing, but now I find I can sit in the storage room at my lunch hour and just write the whole time."

But Pastan says there are drawbacks to the schedule. "I do have some time to write, sometimes 10 hours a week, which is about the same as I had when my children were babies—though if I were deep in a novel, I doubt that it would feel like enough."

I'D HEARD THAT THE GREAT IRISH WRITER WILLIAM TREVOR WROTE HIS FIRST TWO NOVELS WHILE WORKING AT AN AD AGENCY.

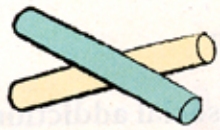
Because of the lack of writing time, Pastan found that she needed to alter her schedule. "After a year, they gave me a special arrangement," she says. "I go in late Mondays and Wednesdays and make up the time nights and weekends. Fridays I work from home, so I can use the two hours of commuting time to write."

Pros of office jobs: an appreciation of writing time, more efficient use of writing time, the structure of a schedule, health insurance.

Cons of office jobs: less time overall to write, they're tedious when you don't care about what the company does.

Pastan points out that it makes a big difference that she enjoys what her employer does. "I like working at a place that cares as passionately about art as I do—it makes me happy, and it makes me feel that making my own art is important, too. By contrast, when I worked at [a company that made corrugated cardboard], it was hard not to feel that life was dull and pointless."

I wondered if it was difficult to keep a writing schedule while working 9 to 5.



'Life experience' jobs

Joseph Conrad had a stint in the merchant marines. Anton Chekhov was a doctor. Pearl Buck taught in China. There's a long-standing idea among writers that a day job can be a means of achieving the life experience writers explore in their novels. But does working in a quirky or dramatic environment actually give you material for writing?

I've held several jobs that loosely fall into this category: one as an overnight supervisor at a homeless shelter in Cambridge, Mass.; another as a lounge pianist at a Chinese hotel. During the job in Cambridge, I hardly wrote, because half the week I was staying up all night, and I could never get my sleep schedule in order. When I worked at the hotel in China, I was able to write my novel most days, because I only played in the evenings. I've never been able to write well about either job experience.

Wilhelm, who has taken several "life experience" jobs, including a job in a traveling carnival, has found the same to be true for himself. "I don't recall ever

The moonlighting writer

HOW ONE FREELANCER MANAGES TO KEEP HIS WRITING UP DESPITE A FULL-TIME DAY JOB

By Peter Smolens

IT'S 5:15 A.M. Monday, and I've just started writing this article because this is one of the times I write.

Like most of you, I don't have the luxury of writing during the middle of the day, since I hold a full-time job as a technical writer. From 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., I work at an office writing computer manuals for the U.S. government. In the early morning, at nights, and on weekends, I moonlight as a nonfiction writer. You can, too.

Like me, if you can find a few minutes during the week, you can become a writer. The ingredients are clear-cut: Find the time. Find a place to write. Query publishers. Do research and interview sources. Write the article.

Unless you're one of the chosen few, most writers have to find another way to provide income while pursuing their writing career. And you're in good company: Over the years, writers like Tom Clancy and John Grisham began their careers as moonlighters.

8 p.m. Tuesday and 5:15 a.m. and 8 p.m. Wednesday: I'm writing again.

I'm not going to claim that finding time to write is easy, but I try to write on a regular basis. If you really want to write, you'll make the adjustments. In my case, I often grab a couple of hours early in the morning, at nights after my wife has gone to bed, and on weekends after the cat wakes me up.

There are 168 hours in any seven-day period. You work 40 hours a week. Add 10 hours for commuting and that's 50 hours. That means you still have 118 hours to do whatever you want. I'm not saying you should deprive yourself of time for family and personal pleasures, but I'm sure you can find a few hours during the week that you can set aside to write.

5:30 a.m. Thursday: writing once more.

One key to being a moonlighting writer is having a place to write. It doesn't have to be permanent, but it must be a place you can easily set up. Just open your laptop and write. With a wireless modem, you can connect to the Internet to send and get emails, and to do your research. I'm writing this section of the article you're reading sitting in my easy chair. I've got my research notes on the arm of the couch and a cat sleeping next to me.

having a job that fed me experiences for writing," he says. "And I've tried to have jobs tailored to that. It just didn't work. I never process things the way I expect to."

In both our cases, we've found that the factors that matter more in a day job are the schedule and nature of the work, rather than the material it offers. The material has come from unexpected places. I developed the character of one authority figure in my novel based on a boss I had for a catering job. Similarly, Wilhelm has been surprised to find that he's written about writers and waiters in his fiction.

When you're doing any job, you come up against experiences of tension, humor and sadness, and the fact of being surprised by them often makes them more powerful than a dramatic experience you've actually sought out.

Pros of 'life experience' jobs: being able to say that you have done something unique.

Cons of 'life experience' jobs: less material than expected, often tough schedules or work environments that get in the way of writing.

Conclusion

So what are the factors that matter most in a writer's day job? The writers I spoke to agree that having consistent, predictable spaces of time to write is a must. Most writers find mornings more productive than other parts of the day, because they have more energy and fewer distractions, but there are some who enjoy coming home to a manuscript, like a gin and tonic, in the evenings.

And they agreed on something else. "Not worrying about health insurance can also help you write" is how Solomon puts it. It takes a big stress off a freelancer to know that an employer is providing health coverage and standard benefits.

Many writers appreciate the variation a day job offers from the routines of writing: the social aspect, the physicality. Wilhelm goes as far as to say, "The worst day job you can have as a writer is one that's writing-related."

It also appears that an important factor for all these writers is that they enjoy or care about the jobs they do outside writing. It's a drag to go into a job that feels meaningless, and this sense of meaning or purpose seems to do a lot toward keeping an optimistic attitude in general, which is one of the largest challenges of writing.

This was instructive to me, since I'd always looked at day jobs as a hassle, an obstacle in the way of writing. I'd thought that the most important criterion was that the job provide the most money in the least time. But it was much more helpful when I started to look at the job as part of a lifestyle in which I was writing, and to try to adjust the jobs I currently held to increase the amount and quality of the writing time I had.

While different jobs work well for different writers, there seems to be some agreement on the qualities they find helpful in a day job. If you're unhappy with the amount of writing you're able to get done in your current day job, look at these factors in considering a new one:

- Consistent time to write in the mornings (or the most productive time of day)
- Control over scheduling
- A benefits package
- A social environment
- Physical movement
- Satisfaction in what you're doing
- Time with friends, family or loved ones

Justin Kramon

Justin Kramon is the author of the novel *Finny* (Random House), and his work has received honors from the Michener-Copernicus Society of America and The Best American Short Stories. He teaches at Gotham Writers' Workshop. Web: justinkramon.com.

5:15 a.m. Friday: I'm back at it again.

Moonlighting nonfiction writers have an advantage over fiction writers because we can get assignments, rather than writing on spec. After some basic research, I write a one-page letter to an editor, suggesting an article idea. At last count, I have more than 20 queries sitting in editors' email boxes. Once I get the go-ahead, I write faster knowing the editor is waiting for the manuscript.

6:30 a.m. Saturday: back at it.

In the past, going to the library in the evening after working a day job was a regular, time-consuming part of the writing process. Today, you can do your background research on the Internet and save a lot of time, as well as obtain names of sources and contact information.



Peter Smolens at work in his easy chair, with his laptop and one of the family cats, Spice.

Then you're ready to conduct interviews. For a moonlighter, this can be a challenge. You can do a phone interview, of course, but personal calls at work are often prohibited. I've gotten around this by conducting interviews over the lunch hour in my car while using my cell phone.

Another tip: Use the difference in time zones. I'm on the East Coast and have interviewed people on the West Coast after work. Another option: an email interview.

6 a.m. Sunday: back to writing once more.

Once you have the information, putting together a nonfiction article is pretty straightforward. In *How to Write Articles That Sell*, L. Perry Wilber describes a sure way to writing success by breaking down article writing into manageable segments. By writing 200 words a day, you can complete a 1,000-word article in five days.

Before writing, I outline the sections of my article. Each time I sit down to write, I write a section of the article. This way my mind is focused on the task at hand.

That's what I did with this article, and it's 7 a.m. Sunday as I write these final words.

Peter Smolens

As a freelance photographer and writer, Peter Smolens has had articles published in such newspapers and magazines as *Digital Photo, CamperWays, Highways, The Original New England Guide, Trip and Tour* and the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*. Web: pbsstudios.com.