

MAKE YOURSELF UNTOUCHABLE

Sarah Davies explains how she's managed to break all contact with the world while writing, and shows how you can do it too

What, be uncontactable? For a whole day? Every week? Oh, I couldn't possibly! Such has been the reaction of many people this year when I tell them how I've started isolating myself from the world while writing.

It all began when I read Neil Pasricha's article 'Why you need an untouchable day every week', in the *Harvard Business Review*. My immediate thought was: 'I can do that.' Usually, like most people, I then get on with real life and forget about ideas like this, but for some reason this time I picked up my diary and scheduled some untouchable days.

In his article, Pasricha explained how he plans his days 16 weeks ahead of time, because his work schedule allows him to do that. I keep a weather eye on my month, but only schedule my untouchable day on a Sunday when I'm planning my work for the following week.

And no, I don't always schedule a whole day because sometimes I don't have a whole day to spare (and there's a whole other discussion there about needs, wants and choices).

For many reading this, writing might be the thing you fit in between a regular job and your family. You might only have a few precious hours a week. So why not make them untouchable and keep them that way?

What if 'stuff' comes up?

In real life things do often come up at the last minute that simply can't be missed or rescheduled. You can move your untouchable time if you have to, but you must fit it in the same week.

Untouchable days or times are not about luxury, they are about committing to showing up and putting in the hours so that you achieve your writing goals. Make it clear to yourself and your family and

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friends that this is work time and that as soon as you've finished, they will get your undivided attention.

How do I do it?

Scheduling the time is all very well, but it's really easy to look at that block of time and think: 'But instead I could...'

The bottom line is, if you've scheduled an appointment in your diary, it's a thing that's happening. Get into the mindset of treating these appointments with yourself just as seriously as you treat appointments with anyone else and show up ready to get the job done.

You don't have to leave the house to do your untouchable time – it depends on your home circumstances. If it's quiet and you can resist turning on your phone and the internet, then you're probably going to be fine. And don't feel you need to sit at your desk (if you have one). Move to a different place – the kitchen or a sofa – and see how that changes the experience.

If you choose to go out, choose your spot wisely. Libraries are good as everyone else has their head down working too. Finding the perfect coffee shop or pub can also be a good option, but you might need to visit a few before you find the perfect environment for you...

Other suggestions from established writers include:

- Going out walking
- Taking a long bus ride

- Going on a train journey
- Sitting in the garden or local park.

But I can't work without wi-fi!

Yes, you can. I was really struck by a few people who said: 'Wi-fi is a must.' Why? I understand that as writers we need to do research, but surely you can write some research notes or just leave a highlighted gap in your draft to remind you to go back and check the facts when you do have internet access?

Some writers download internet pages to view offline when they're on untouchable time, but a lot – me included – write in notebooks and type the work up later. It might seem like making the whole process overly long, but I write better quality stuff if the first draft is done with pen and paper. And you don't have to carry a heavy laptop around with you.

I know if my phone or computer is on, I'm going to struggle not to look on social media or just 'quickly' check my email.

I won't lie, sometimes I have missed out on potential work leads because I haven't responded to something the minute it was posted. But those instances are the exception not the rule. Whereas by giving myself untouchable time, I've upped my productivity and the quality of my work because I've been unashamed to take the time and really get into the flow of the project in hand.

It's a change of mindset

So often as writers we feel guilty about actually doing it. It seems like an indulgence and there are always mundane house chores to do, 'real' work (if we still have a day job), or commitments that we convince ourselves are more important than putting pen to paper.

Once we convince ourselves, though, that we are real writers – with the rejection slips and the novel in the bottom drawer



to prove it – we need to set ourselves our untouchable time, whether that's a whole day or just an hour. And we need to show up ready to write.

Stick at it

You may find you sit down and think, 'I'm not in the mood today', but I encourage you to stick at it, even if you have to start writing a stream of consciousness piece about how you really don't have anything to say today. Eventually you will get into the flow.

If you can stand it, I'd really encourage you to leave your computer at home if you go out, or switched off if you're at home. And definitely switch your mobile phone off.

What about emergencies?

Let's face it, they hardly ever happen. If you decide to work away from home, let someone know where you are so that you can be found. Otherwise, allow yourself some time during the day when you do switch on your devices. You'll soon see that most things can wait.

In conclusion

Untouchable days or chunks of time can enable you to take your writing to a whole new level by giving you the time to focus on and produce more work. But you have to be dedicated enough to:

- Make an appointment with yourself in your diary.
- Make the decision to treat appointments with yourself as seriously as you treat appointments with anyone else.
- Do the preparatory work beforehand so that you have everything you need to make the best use of your untouchable time.
- Show up to the appointment and work hard (just like you would for any other appointment).
- Follow up afterwards and fill in the gaps in your writing, or research the ideas you came up with during your session.

If you do all of these things, if you treat yourself as you would any other client, then you will find yourself getting more done, getting more rejections (and more commissions, because the more you pitch, the more success you'll get).

You'll be working smarter and feeling like you're making headway in the world of writing.

Finally, if you stick to your guns and keep showing up, you could – like Pasricha himself – find yourself scheduling not one untouchable day a week but two!