



## THIS COLUMN WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE

Oliver Burkeman

There's a popular subgenre of books about writing known informally as "writer porn", in which famous authors describe their daily routines, which pens they use and, especially, the secluded mountaintop cabins where they work each morning for six blissfully undisturbed hours. I don't think I've ever actually met such an author, but for anyone whose job is even slightly "creative", they stir envy: we'd all love such big chunks of time in which to focus. Instead, our lives are plagued with what the blogger Merlin Mann, at 43folders.com, calls "interstitial time" – small chunks of minutes spent waiting at the doctor's surgery, or for someone who's late, or for a meeting postponed at short notice.

It feels like time wasted. But it needn't be. The poet William Carlos Williams, for example, wrote much of his oeuvre on the backs of prescription pads during gaps in his workday as a paediatrician. Here are some insights from bloggers and authors on using interstitial time, condensed into a form you can digest in three minutes, while waiting for that delayed train:

1. Don't fall for the "major project" fallacy: really important things, we tell ourselves, deserve big blocks of time and undivided concentration – so they never get done. In truth, most "major projects" won't be worse for being worked on in short bursts. As for those that will, remember GK Chesterton: "If a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing badly." Would you rather do

something only fairly well, or die before you've done it at all?

2. Batch your tasks: You'll fit more into a sliver of time if you're doing several similar tasks – answering a stack of emails, say – than if you try to switch between different kinds of activity. Workplace studies show that time spent "task-switching" eats up the day. Even if your lifestyle does allow long, uninterrupted work periods, batching routine tasks is still sensible: deal with all your email twice daily, for example, and you'll spend less time on it overall.

3. Take inspiration from knitters, Mann suggests. Knitting fulfils the three criteria of a good interstitial-time activity: it's portable, it can be done amid distractions, and even a few seconds spent on it contributes to the end result. (That's not the case with tasks requiring "set-up", such as waiting forever while Windows boots up on your laptop.) Identify in advance which of your tasks fit the knitting criteria: those involving reading and (hand)writing are a good place to start. Or take up knitting.

4. Do nothing, but do it deliberately. You don't have to use interstitial time to cram more activity into every last minute. But if you want to use it to "stop and smell the roses", you have to choose to stop. Martin

Boroson's fantastic book *The One-Moment Master* is all about learning to condense the practice of meditation into these fleeting moments. And about how, from a certain perspective, a sequence of fleeting moments are all we ever really have anyway.

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## ARE YOU HAPPY?

Victoria Leith, body percussionist

Your body is a percussive instrument, and body percussion is about hitting and slapping yourself in a rhythmic way. It's rooted in South African culture and was a means of communicating when miners were not allowed to speak to each other. Bodies are like a drum kit. I use my hands, legs and feet, which become the bass drum.

Hitting a drum can raise endorphin levels; using your body as percussion does the same, yet it's a different feeling, because you're more in-tune with the material of your body.

I am happy, truly happy. It doesn't mean I have to go round smiling all day – I still cry, get upset – but there is a balance within that enables me to be happy when the world is spinning

off its axis. Detachment and forgiveness are key: a person's unhappiness is often linked to something they choose not to let go of, be it a memory, a fear of the future, an addiction or a daily worry. Be grateful. Let go.

Every day I pray with my husband and 18-month toddler – I ground myself when I say prayers. I eat good food, and I don't drink alcohol – it never brought me happiness. I avoid things that make me feel burdened, accept tests and deal with them with logic and prayer. I watch films that make me feel good. I listen to music that feeds my soul.

There's body percussion, but there's also raw chocolate, the sound of rain, being still, dancing... **Craig Taylor**

**'You were made for enjoyment, and the world was filled with things which you will enjoy, unless you are too proud to be pleased with them, or too grasping to care for what you cannot turn to other account than mere delight. Remember that the most beautiful things in the world are the most useless: peacocks and lilies, for instance.'** John Ruskin, *The Stones Of Venice*, 1853