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The Written Word

What does it take to write a book? Hilary Achauer talks to Samir Chopra and bestselling novelist Eleanor Brown about the joy—and pain—of writing.

By Hilary Achauer

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Tanya Northrup Photography

When all she wants to do is stop, Eleanor Brown breaks her task into manageable parts.

“Small goals are important. You have to make it achievable,” Brown said.

Samir Chopra doesn't enjoy the process, but knows he'd be even unhappier if he stopped.

“I wish I could stop, but if I stopped, I'd be miserable,” he said.

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They're not talking about CrossFit. They're talking about writing.

Brown is a *New York Times* bestselling author. Chopra has published four books. Both are CrossFit athletes.

Writers are a strange bunch. Most could never dream of doing anything else. They need to write. And yet writers procrastinate. They drag their heels. They talk about how difficult it is to face a blank page. At times, they hate writing.

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In *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamott puts it this way: "I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not one of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident."

It's never easy. The journey is filled with detours and roadblocks in the form of self-doubt, uncertainty and distractions.

Like most authors, Brown and Chopra have developed techniques and strategies for being productive, for overcoming obstacles and for getting to the final period.

Becoming a Writer

Before she became a full-time, professional author, Brown said she did everything else, from working as a wedding coordinator to taking a job as an executive assistant at an investment firm. At one company, Brown's job was Y2K compliance.

"I worked on the Y2K project," she said of the late-'90s fear that the world's computers would simultaneously crash when the calendar changed over from 1999 to 2000. "I stopped it from happening. You can thank me," she joked.

Brown said all the jobs she had in her 20s were great preparation for being a writer, but teaching seventh grade and planning weddings were the most instructive.

"There's a lot of drama in those jobs," Brown said. "People get drunk and act like idiots (at weddings)."



Tanya Northrup Photography

Brown at work on her treadmill desk.

Through it all, Brown kept writing, but she kept most of her work to herself.

When she was 25 years old, Brown went to graduate school and got a master's degree in English literature. She said it was time to "feed her soul," but even then she didn't think she would ever make a living as a writer.

She thought teaching would be it.

Even though Brown wasn't a writer with a capital "W," she was always writing short stories, articles and what she calls "really terrible novels."

Brown would devote her summers to long days of writing, and it was during one summer break that her first novel started to take shape.

"That's the glorious thing about teaching: the long breaks," she said.

Written Word ... (continued)

This book, which took her about a year to write, eventually became *The Weird Sisters*. It was published in 2011 to glowing reviews and quickly became a bestseller on several lists including that of *The New York Times*. It tells the tale of three sisters who come from a family heavily influenced by the works of William Shakespeare.

"(The book) was much more successful than I thought," she said. "It put me in a strange position. I have shared something personal. People have expectations."

In December 2011 Brown quit her day job and became a full-time writer.

Many people think the life of a writer is filled with dreamy days lounging in front of a computer, either in a book-filled office or in the corner of a cozy coffee shop, easily cranking out genius prose. But talk to any professional writer and the words that most commonly come up are "panic," "anxiety" and "fear."

This is why Brown finds CrossFit so helpful when she's immersed in the writing process.

"In both writing and CrossFit, there's this moment where I'm in the middle and I think, 'I can't finish this,'" Brown said.

"It seems like I started a century ago and I have another century to go. But in both cases, it's really just a matter of steeling my resolve and pushing through until the end. Writing and CrossFit both require a certain kind of mental toughness and quixotic optimism, a belief that it can be done, no matter how impossible it looks on the board or on the page.

"CrossFit is my reward for hitting my daily word-count goal. It's also the place I go to work out problems in my writing. CrossFit requires a kind of fundamental focus that is a pleasure in contrast to the wide-open potential of writing," Brown said.



Tanya Northrup Photography



CrossFit is Brown's reward for hitting her daily word count.

In *On Writing*, Stephen King's classic book, King breaks down the craft. He says that writers not only need to build their own toolbox and fill it with tools for writing—like vocabulary and grammar—but must build up enough muscle to carry the toolbox around.

"Then, instead of looking at a hard job and getting discouraged, you will perhaps seize the correct tool and get immediately to work," he wrote.

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While talent is important, it will get you nowhere without hard work.

"I believe large numbers of people have at least some talent as writers and storytellers, and that those talents can be strengthened and sharpened," King wrote.

Substitute almost anything for "writers and storytellers" in that sentence—athletes, cooks, public speakers—and it still works. The greater the initial talent, the greater the potential for mastery, of course, but few pick up a tool of the trade and find instant success.

Ira Glass, host of NPR's *This American Life*, said that all aspiring creative types share one thing: good taste. When a person with good taste starts out attempting to create work, there's this awkward phase when he or she recognizes the work is no good.

"Your taste is why your work disappoints you," Glass said. "A lot of people never get past this phase; they quit. Most people I know who do interesting, creative work went through years of this."



Tanya Northrup Photography

To cut down on distractions while she writes, Brown uses an app that blocks the Internet.

Glass said the only way to close this gap is by sheer volume of work—building the muscle King talked about.

"It's gonna take awhile. It's normal to take awhile. You've just gotta fight your way through," Glass said.

The Routine

For Brown, the routine is important. Although she and her partner, author J.C. Hutchins, both work from home in a suburb of Denver, Colo., they go to separate offices in the morning.

"I go left, he goes right, and we don't see each other until lunchtime," Brown said.

Brown starts her day writing three pages longhand, with a pen and paper, a technique recommended in *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron.

There are no expectations or goals with these pages.

"Sometimes, when I have nothing to say, I just write 'la la la la la' for three pages," Brown said.

It's like a pre-workout warm-up: Brown limbers up and lubricates her creative mind before getting down to business. Once she's done with her pages, Brown turns on her computer, activating Freedom, an Internet-blocking productivity software. Then she gets to work, writing most often from her treadmill desk.

"The motion of walking stimulates my brain," Brown said. She has a regular desk but prefers to write and walk, with the treadmill set at its lowest speed.

"I listen to classical music because I once read that we can only use different channels in our brain: visual, audio and verbal."

Brown feels music with words interrupts the verbal channel of her brain.

Once set up with her music and her treadmill desk, free from the distraction of Facebook and Twitter, Brown works for two and half to three hours. That's as much as she can stand.

She sets easily achievable goals for each day; in her case that means 1,000 words a day.

"Goals are important," Brown said. "I could not do 5,000 words a day. If I didn't meet that goal I'd feel like a failure. You do have to be forgiving."

Even her 1,000-words-a-day rule can be changed.

Once, when she was in the midst of a particularly bad patch, Brown told a friend she didn't think she could make 1,000 words.

"My friend said, 'OK, can you do 500?' I didn't think I could, so she said, 'Can you do five?'"

That day, Brown wrote five words.

After a few hours of writing, Brown heads to CrossFit Modig in Highlands Ranch, Colo. She's done with writing and CrossFit before lunchtime.

"Then two hardest parts of my day are over," Brown said. "Everything else by comparison seems easy."

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"Neil Gaiman said in a commencement speech, 'I'm a professional email answerer,'" Brown said.

She spends her afternoon answering emails, participating in social media, calling in to book clubs—handling all the business associated with being a professional author whose debut offering became a bestseller.

Daily Discipline

Samir Chopra writes nonfiction, but the professor of philosophy at Brooklyn College said the writing process is no less painful than writing fiction.

Chopra has written or co-written four books: *The India-Pakistan Air War of 1965* (2005, with PVS Jagan Mohan), *Decoding Liberation: The Promise of Free and Open Source Software* (2007, with Scott Dexter), *A Legal Theory for Autonomous Artificial Agents* (2011, with Laurence White), and *Brave New Pitch: The Evolution of Modern Cricket*



Courtesy Samir Chopra

Chopra writes his blog posts at night, when the house is quiet.

(2012). He writes a cricket blog for ESPNcrinfo.com and a [personal blog](#) combining his diverse interests.

Chopra is at work on his next academic book, the bulk of which he will write during an upcoming teaching sabbatical. Chopra has tried writing in the library and in coffee shops, but he prefers to write at home.

"I like my keyboard," he said, "I don't like writing on a laptop."

Now that Chopra and his wife have a baby at home, being productive is much more difficult—especially because his desk is in the corner of the main living space.

"Just being at home is distracting," he said.

Making things even more difficult, Chopra will be taking care of the baby when his wife goes back to work in a few months. He plans to work while the baby naps but

recognizes he might need to arrange for childcare as his deadline approaches.

**In order to make progress,
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In order to make progress, Chopra practices what he calls "Internet fasting." It's a self-imposed version of the Freedom

software Brown uses. Chopra gets up, pours himself some coffee and doesn't so much as check his email until he's written for an hour.

"It makes me unhappy how addicted I am (to the Internet)," he said.

Chopra said the most important thing for him is just getting in front of the computer with his hands on the keyboard.

"It's like the famous Roger Ebert quote: 'The muse only visits while you work,'" he said.

Like Brown, Chopra finds it's best if he keeps his daily goals modest.

"I just write for one hour. I set my sights low."

Chopra's blogs add to his workload, but just as working out

frequently makes a person stronger, he believes the daily practice of writing ultimately makes him more productive.

"When I'm blogging I'm using my writing brain," Chopra said. "I have to think of ways of making a critical point and making people think."

He said his writing disciplines—blogging and book writing—feed back into each other.

Chopra's first book was inspired by his father, who was in the air force during the India-Pakistan air war of 1965. Chopra's dad died when Chopra was 12 years old, and the book was an effort to engage in what he calls "personal archeology."

His co-author on *The India-Pakistan Air War of 1965* "had a website dedicated to this topic. I told him, 'Maybe I can help you,'" Chopra said. The two collaborated long distance, sending each other drafts and editing each other's work.

"We did not meet until the book was finished," Chopra said.

Next, Chopra wrote about the relationship between open-source software and freedom, as well as about legal theory for autonomous artificial intelligence. His most recent book, *A Brave New Pitch*, is about the evolution of the sport of cricket.

"A deadline and the expectations of a co-author forced me to get moving," Chopra said of these projects.

He says another key to his success has been CrossFit, which he started in 2009 at CrossFit South Brooklyn. He was burnt out from the regular gym scene and decided to give CrossFit a shot. He's been going consistently ever since.

"(CrossFit) helps impose a structure in my daily life," Chopra said. "I have to get out of my house and work out for an hour."

Chopra said the values of patience and humility he has developed in his almost four years of doing CrossFit have helped as he works through difficult ideas and concepts.

"The steadfast application of the life of the mind is helped by the pursuit of CrossFit," he said.

Olympic lifting, in particular, has made him more patient with incremental progress.

"I've heard it takes 2,000 to 3,000 reps to get a clean right," he said. "I'm still working on that."



Asta Fivgas

Chopra trades typing for tires in Brooklyn, N.Y.



Asta Flugas

Chopra reflects on his squat, and perhaps his next blog post.

Inspiration

So let's say you carve out a time to write, manage to ignore the easy distractions of the Internet and sit down at the computer only to find you have no ideas. The infinite possibilities of the blank page are mocked by the flashing cursor.

Where do writers get all their ideas, anyway?

**"It doesn't ever get easier.
The only way out is through."**

—Samir Chopra

"Every writer writes about the things they wonder about, the things that are eating at them," Brown said.

"Inspiration can come from anywhere," Brown explained. "I was looking at a gossip magazine, and I saw a photo of Jennifer Aniston and her realtor."

Brown began to wonder about that relationship. What was it like? She hasn't turned this idea into a book yet, but it's an example of the kind of thing that starts her wheels turning.

Some concepts that fascinate her are what it means to be a grown-up, and why, when we're around our siblings, do we act like we're 12 years old?

Brown finds that some of the same issues are coming up in her latest book.

"It's a belated coming of age," Brown said. "Some of the issues are: do you control your own fate?"

Ideas also come from reading, and most authors are unapologetic bookworms.

"Being a good writer begins with being a good reader," Chopra said.

Brown agrees, and she feels being a reader is essential if you want to be a writer.

"Any sort of writing is a conversation," Brown said. "You cannot be a part of the conversation if you aren't listening."

Both authors agree that reading is essential, but it must be combined with putting words on paper. At some point you have to stop reading and start writing, no matter how painful it might be.

"Talent doesn't hurt, but the world is full of talented people who never made anything happen."

—Eleanor Brown

"Talent doesn't hurt, but the world is full of talented people who never made anything happen," Brown said. She said it's all about practice and habit.

Chopra agrees that there are no detours; you simply have to write.

"It doesn't ever get easier," Chopra said. "The only way out is through."

Open-Door Editing

In *Timequake*, Kurt Vonnegut wrote about two kinds of writers: "Swoopers write a story quickly, higgledy-piggledy, crinkum-crankum, any which way. Then they go over it again painstakingly, fixing everything that is just plain awful or doesn't work. Bashers go one sentence at a time, getting it exactly right before they go on to the next one. When they're done they're done."

Process aside, both types of writers have to put something on the page, and fear of failure, of producing bad work, stymies some would-be writers. Many successful writers know just getting words on the page is the first step, even if what they write is messy, even embarrassing. It's a first draft. To possess the audacity to get words on a page, the usual standards have to be momentarily put aside, at least for the "swoopers." For the "bashers," those standards must be met—perhaps after repeated bouts of self-censorship



Asta Fingas

"It doesn't ever get easier. The only way out is through."
—Samir Chopra

and self-editing—before a word gets onto the page. For them the revisions happen internally, and the editors are often vicious with the red pen.

King puts it succinctly in *On Writing*: "Write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open."

What this means is that the first draft is for the writer's eyes only. Those words provide a foundation upon which the writer can build. Many times it's an invisible foundation—as nothing remains from the first draft in later versions—but plans for the support structure are still there.



Asta Fingas

Like a good CrossFit coach improves movement, an editor helps a writer fine-tune his or her words.

Once the first draft is done, then comes the exhaustive (and exhausting) revision process.

Chopra says he enjoys the initial editing process, which he says is a relief from the “utter panic” of the writing stage.

“My writing process remains the same as it ever has: I make a lot of notes and then I work them into shape. I have never worked with outlines. This has always meant that the intermediate stage of my writing—from notes to a draft—is acutely anxiety-and-panic provoking,” Chopra wrote on his blog.

It’s in this initial editing stage that the writer often discovers the value of what he or she has created. Revisiting one’s own work can sometimes hold pleasant surprises. It’s here the author discovers the work isn’t terrible but might even be good.

It’s not unlike drilling the parts of the snatch—the pull, the shrug, the reception, etc.—for months on end and then one day finding it all comes together. The previously heavy bar soars overhead and the lift is completed.

Once the work has been shaped into a draft that might actually make sense to another person, it’s time to get someone else’s opinion.

This can be an extremely nerve-wracking experience, especially for an author who has poured his or her soul onto the page, and many writers rely on a trusted reader who offers feedback in the early stages of the writing process.

Brown said she’s tried out writer’s groups and writing classes and found them helpful when she was starting out. Now, she writes on her own, relying on her boyfriend as her trusted first reader.

“My boyfriend is a writer, and he is my first reader. He’s my

most trusted resource,” Brown said. “He is the person I want to read (my work) first.”

Hutchins, Brown’s boyfriend, is skilled at writing compelling plots and is best known for his *7th Son* series, published in print and podcast. Brown said she’s more into character development.

In fact, when her editor bought *The Weird Sisters*, the editor’s feedback to Brown was, “You have written a beautiful book. Something needs to happen in it.”

For Chopra’s blog posts, his trusted reader is his wife. He says it’s a bit more challenging to find people to read his academic books, because the subject matter is fairly esoteric.

“You want someone who is sympathetic and critical,” Chopra said.

The final editing stages are just as agonizing as the initial stages, he says.

“You are just so sick of your work,” he said. “I have read this fucking book 20 times; you think. ‘I just want to be done with it.’”

At present, Brown is deep in the editing stage of her second novel. She said it took a year to write and just as long to edit. Her first effort was such a success—more than she ever imagined—and now Brown feels the pressure for her second novel to be just as successful.

“You want something you are proud of,” Brown said of why she’s taking so long to revise her current project.

“Being an artist, you have to have incredible optimism in your own work and an ability to be objective and honest with yourself,” Brown said.

“Failure is where we learn. All those projects in a drawer, I learned something,” she said. “A successful artist will look at those failures and figure out how not to repeat them.”



About the Author

*Hilary Achauer is an award-winning freelance writer and editor specializing in health and wellness content. In addition to writing articles, online content, blogs and newsletters, Hilary is an editor and writer for the **CrossFit Journal** and contributes to the CrossFit Games site. An amateur boxer-turned-CrossFit athlete, Hilary lives in San Diego with her husband and two small children and trains at CrossFit Pacific Beach. To contact her, visit hilaryachauer.com.*