

Prioritizing Lessons

I had a fantastic 2009 with two 3 book deals just 5 months apart and signing on with a Hollywood producer to adapt my first book into a screenplay and shop to studios, but now I have to survive 2010 and meet all those deadlines I said yes to. Saying yes to all that involved a lot of careful thought and planning.

I have been married for over twenty years, worked as a teacher at one time, and am now a stay at home mom of four children who are involved in a ton of activities. I volunteer in the writing organizations I belong to as well as the activities my children are involved with. On top of all that, I am a full time writer with six contracted books. My middle name is prioritizing! ☺ I hope you walk away from my lessons with something useful. My lessons will cover getting organized, staying organized, and meeting deadlines. You really can have it all ... with a little planning.

Lesson #1 – Getting Organized!

Prioritizing is all about organization. In order to get organized, you must first figure out what all of your priorities are. Priorities consist of any demand that is placed on you and involves a certain amount of your time. Work, spouse, children, pets, cleaning, grocery shopping, eating, exercising, writing, volunteering, sleeping, etc. I am a very visual person, and since we are all writers, why not combine the two. Lists and schedules work wonders for me. They allow you to see exactly what you accomplish (or don't accomplish) in the course of a day, what you have time to do, and where you might be wasting time. So I am going to share some of the techniques I use in my own life in hopes of helping some of you become more organized.

First, make a list of your own priorities, then beside each item, write down the amount of time each item requires for you to complete. Some items might have a time that is easily figured out like four hours or eight hours for work, thirty minutes for exercise, and one hour for grocery shopping, etc. While other items you might have to determine how much time you are going to spend on them or with them like children, pets, a spouse, etc. Don't worry about the hours in a day just yet; simply fill in what you think is fair.

Next, write down the hours in "your" day from the time you get up in the morning until the time you go to bed. Go back to your priority list and fill in your priorities in the appropriate time slots. Some slots are easy to fill like the hours you work and time spent with pets or children or spouse. You know when they need a walk, are going to be home, and when they have activities scheduled. Other slots are harder to fill like exercising, writing, grocery shopping, cleaning, etc.

Last, take a look at your list. No time for all your activities you say? I say make time. It's time to prioritize! Determine what items you absolutely have to do, and then determine what items you simple want to do. Can you afford to let some of these items go, or pay someone to do them for you? Learning to say no is a start.

Or maybe you've assigned too much time to spend on some of your demands. See if you can cut back on some of the time you spend on a couple of items, so you have more time for other items. And combining some of the items is also a possibility. Writers have to learn to become pros at multi-tasking.

Finally, maybe you need to add more time to your “awake” hours. Try getting up an hour earlier or going to bed an hour later. You’d be amazed at how those hours add up in the course of a week, month, year. Once you have an acceptable and fair schedule figured out, you have to let everyone in your life know about it, and then stick to it. Next, I will discuss how to stick with the schedule you just made. But for now, make your priority list and create your schedule. Have you overscheduled yourself or, ahem, under scheduled yourself and are simply procrastinating ☺ Inquiring minds want to know....

Lesson #2 – Staying Organized!

In the last lesson we talked about making a list of your priorities and creating an acceptable schedule that meets your demands. In this lesson we are going to talk about implementing that schedule into your life in a way that you will stick to.

First, call a family meeting and let everyone know in no uncertain terms that you are human. You are one person trying to do it all and be it all so everyone will be happy. But if you’re not happy, then what’s the point? You chose this life--got married, accepted that job, had children, bought that pet, etc.--but that doesn’t mean you have to go insane while living it. You need a reasonable amount of time to complete your priorities, and each priority has its own merit and value to you or it wouldn’t be on your list. Your family needs to learn patience and accept that your list is sacred.

Next, post that list on your refrigerator for all to see, and post a second copy right by your work station as a reminder to yourself. Again with the visual, but it really works. Out of sight, out of mind. So keep your schedule in sight, and then no one can say, “It’s not my fault. How was I supposed to know you were doing something important?” They will know that everything on your list is important, and unless the house is burning down, don’t mess with the schedule. Because a happy writer, means a happy everyone! It’s like with teaching. If kids know what the rules are and what the consequences are for breaking them, they are much better behaved and more apt to follow them. It’s the adults who take a bit of smacking upside the head to finally get it ☺

Finally, stick to your schedule. If you stick to your game plan, your family will know you’re serious and things become routine. Kids aren’t the only ones who thrive on routine. When you have routine and structure in your life, you can accomplish all of your goals and things get done!

Now go post those schedules and see what kind of reaction you get, decide how you’re going to handle it, and stand your ground. Don’t give in and don’t give up, even if it takes a while for the “schedule” to catch on. In the end, you’ll be happy you laid ground rules and that you have a plan. Because your family members aren’t the only ones who need to take your writing seriously ... you do, too. Good luck!

Lesson #3 – Meeting Deadlines!

First, accept no excuses, especially from yourself. I don’t have time to write, my children won’t take naps, I have writer’s block, etc. I repeat, there are no excuses. Make the time. As I said before get up an hour earlier, stay up an hour later, write on your lunch break, write at your child’s sports practice, in the waiting room, etc. If you want to be a writer badly enough, you will find the time. When my children were little, I wrote during

naptime. When they stopped taking naps, I made them have quiet time. Set that rule, stick to it, and it will become routine.

As for writer's block, it doesn't exist. Nothing can stop your hand from moving, even if only crap appears on the paper. Just keep writing and eventually inspiration will strike.

Second, set the mood for whatever priority you're completing. I wear my iPod while cleaning. I sometimes have a glass of wine while cooking and I like to try new recipes since I hate to cook just to feed my family. Figure out your meals for the week so you're not scrambling and wasting time each day. Don't make writing turn into a chore. Yes you have a deadline (even if it's just one you set for yourself), but you can still find the joy that drew you to become a writer in the first place. I have my favorite drink close by, I light candles, sometimes I play soft music. For me, writing has always been my "me time". Just because I have insane deadlines, I refuse to let that take the joy out of the process for me.

I also make the most of my non-writing time. For example I read the last page of a scene before bed and keep a notebook and pen by my bedside. Since we often dream about the last thing we saw or talked about, this technique sometimes leads to wonderful inspiration once we wake up. I do the same thing in the morning after checking email, etc. I read the last page of what I wrote so while I'm making lunches, cleaning or whatever, my mind is thinking about my story. This way by the time I sit down to write, I already know exactly what I'm going to say. It allows you to stop wasting time when you first sit down to write, trying to figure out where you left off and what you need to do next.

Another essential tidbit you should know about yourself is at what speed do you write? Figure out how many pages per hour you can write, and how many hours you have set aside each day as your writing time. This will give you a rough idea of how many pages per day, week, and month you are realistically capable of writing. That way when you do get "the call," you will be able to set up realistic deadlines, knowing exactly how long it takes you to complete a book (based on your schedule). No matter how desperate you are to sell, you need to know this ahead of time before you agree to something and then become overwhelmed and unhappy. Selling two series at once might sound amazing, but can you realistically handle it? Can you handle writing both at the same time and all the promotion that goes with it? I am a very fast writer and I have the luxury of staying home while my kids are at school, not everyone does. Know yourself.

Make the most out of your schedule by combining some of your priorities. Take your child grocery shopping with you and let them help you clean. Turn the radio off and talk on the way to and from your child's activity. Let your child go with you when you walk or feed your pets and make dinner. Have set bed times early enough so you and your spouse can watch your favorite shows and movies together each night. Set aside date nights at least once a week, even if it's at home. Don't forget to talk and share your day with each other. If you truly understand each other, it's easier to be there for each other ... and get them to stick to your schedule ☺ Build in time for your friends and a social life. Build in at least one day a week that you take off. Everyone needs a break, and a day off with "no" schedule can be heaven. It's like a one day cheat on a diet where you get to eat whatever you want, or in this case, "do" whatever you want. And if you get behind on anything during the week, it also gives you a makeup day.

Lastly, check your emails and do your blogging, social networks and promotion while eating breakfast or lunch, or making lunches early in the morning. Never let it spill over into your writing time. And even if you're on a roll with your writing, stop at your designated time. Never let any of your priorities spill over their time slots or your whole schedule will be off and you will fall behind. And just like with a new diet or exercise program, if you fall off the wagon and have an off day, pick yourself up and get right back on the next day. No looking back, no regrets, just move forward and in no time you will have completed your goals ☺

Thanks for listening to me rant about what works for me. And remember, you don't have to do anything exactly the same as someone else, but if even a small part of my routine works for you, then that's progress. Good luck and stay strong, my people! You can do it! See you all on the shelves someday soon ☺