

## SCHEME.

	Hours.	
<b>MORNING.</b> <i>The Question.</i> What good shall I do this day?	{ 5 } { 6 } { 7 }	Rise, wash, and address <i>Powerful Goodness!</i> Con- trive day's business, and take the resolution of the day; prosecute the present study, and breakfast.
	{ 8 } { 9 } { 10 } { 11 }	Work.
<b>NOON.</b>	{ 12 } { 1 }	Read, or look over my accounts, and dine.
<b>AFTERNOON.</b>	{ 2 } { 3 } { 4 } { 5 }	Work.
<b>EVENING.</b> <i>The Question.</i> What good have I done to-day?	{ 6 } { 7 } { 8 } { 9 }	Put things in their places. Supper. Music or diversion, or conversa- tion. Examination of the day.
<b>NIGHT.</b>	{ 10 } { 11 } { 12 } { 1 } { 2 } { 3 } { 4 }	Sleep.

*Benjamin Franklin's ideal daily routine, from his autobiography*

# DAILY RITUALS

How Great Minds Make Time,  
Find Inspiration, and Get to Work

**Mason Currey**

PICADOR

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## INTRODUCTION

Nearly every weekday morning for a year and a half, I got up at 5:30, brushed my teeth, made a cup of coffee, and sat down to write about how some of the greatest minds of the past four hundred years approached this exact same task—that is, how they made the time each day to do their best work, how they organized their schedules in order to be creative and productive. By writing about the admittedly mundane details of my subjects' daily lives—when they slept and ate and worked and worried—I hoped to provide a novel angle on their personalities and careers, to sketch entertaining, small-bore portraits of the artist as a creature of habit. “Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are,” the French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin once wrote. I say, tell me what time you eat, and whether you take a nap afterward.

In that sense, this is a superficial book. It's about the circumstances of creative activity, not the product; it deals with manufacturing rather than meaning. But it's also, inevitably, personal. (John Cheever thought that you couldn't even type a business letter without revealing something of your inner self—isn't that the truth?) My underlying concerns in the book are issues that I struggle with in my own life: How do you do meaningful creative work while also earning a living? Is it better to devote

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yourself wholly to a project or to set aside a small portion of each day? And when there doesn't seem to be enough time for all you hope to accomplish, must you give things up (sleep, income, a clean house), or can you learn to condense activities, to do more in less time, to "work smarter, not harder," as my dad is always telling me? More broadly, are comfort and creativity incompatible, or is the opposite true: Is finding a basic level of daily comfort a prerequisite for sustained creative work?

I don't pretend to answer these questions in the following pages—probably some of them can't be answered, or can be resolved only individually, in shaky personal compromises—but I have tried to provide examples of how a variety of brilliant and successful people have confronted many of the same challenges. I wanted to show how grand creative visions translate to small daily increments; how one's working habits influence the work itself, and vice versa.

The book's title is *Daily Rituals*, but my focus in writing it was really people's *routines*. The word connotes ordinariness and even a lack of thought; to follow a routine is to be on autopilot. But one's daily routine is also a choice, or a whole series of choices. In the right hands, it can be a finely calibrated mechanism for taking advantage of a range of limited resources: time (the most limited resource of all) as well as willpower, self-discipline, optimism. A solid routine fosters a well-worn groove for one's mental energies and helps stave off the tyranny of moods. This was one of William James's favorite subjects. He thought you *wanted* to put part of your life on autopilot; by forming good habits, he said, we can "free our minds to advance to really interesting fields of action."



Ironically, James himself was a chronic procrastinator and could never stick to a regular schedule (see page 80).

As it happens, it was an inspired bout of procrastination that led to the creation of this book. One Sunday afternoon in July 2007, I was sitting alone in the dusty offices of the small architecture magazine that I worked for, trying to write a story due the next day. But instead of buckling down and getting it over with, I was reading *The New York Times* online, compulsively tidying my cubicle, making Nespresso shots in the kitchenette, and generally wasting the day. It was a familiar predicament. I'm a classic "morning person," capable of considerable focus in the early hours but pretty much useless after lunch. That afternoon, to make myself feel better about this often inconvenient predilection (who wants to get up at 5:30 *every day?*), I started searching the Internet for information about other writers' working schedules. These were easy to find, and highly entertaining. It occurred to me that someone should collect these anecdotes in one place—hence the *Daily Routines* blog I launched that very afternoon (my magazine story got written in a last-minute panic the next morning) and, now, this book.

The blog was a casual affair; I merely posted descriptions of people's routines as I ran across them in biographies, magazine profiles, newspaper obits, and the like. For the book, I've pulled together a vastly expanded and better researched collection, while also trying to maintain the brevity and diversity of voices that made the original appealing. As much as possible, I've let my subjects speak for themselves, in quotes from letters, diaries, and interviews. In other cases, I have cobbled together a summary of their routines from secondary sources. And when

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another writer has produced the perfect distillation of his subject's routine, I have quoted it at length rather than try to recast it myself. I should note here that this book would have been impossible without the research and writing of the hundreds of biographers, journalists, and scholars whose work I drew upon. I have documented all of my sources in the Notes section, which I hope will also serve as a guide to further reading.

Compiling these entries, I kept in mind a passage from a 1941 essay by V. S. Pritchett. Writing about Edward Gibbon, Pritchett takes note of the great English historian's remarkable industry—even during his military service, Gibbon managed to find the time to continue his scholarly work, toting along Horace on the march and reading up on pagan and Christian theology in his tent. “Sooner or later,” Pritchett writes, “the great men turn out to be all alike. They never stop working. They never lose a minute. It is very depressing.”

What aspiring writer or artist has not felt this exact sentiment from time to time? Looking at the achievements of past greats is alternately inspiring and utterly discouraging. But Pritchett is also, of course, wrong. For every cheerfully industrious Gibbon who worked nonstop and seemed free of the self-doubt and crises of confidence that dog us mere mortals, there is a William James or a Franz Kafka, great minds who wasted time, waited vainly for inspiration to strike, experienced torturous blocks and dry spells, were racked by doubt and insecurity. In reality, most of the people in this book are somewhere in the middle—committed to daily work but never entirely confident of their progress; always wary of the one off day that undoes the streak. All of them made the time to get

their work done. But there is infinite variation in how they structured their lives to do so.

This book is about that variation. And I hope that readers will find it encouraging rather than depressing. Writing it, I often thought of a line from a letter Kafka sent to his beloved Felice Bauer in 1912. Frustrated by his cramped living situation and his deadening day job, he complained, “time is short, my strength is limited, the office is a horror, the apartment is noisy, and if a pleasant, straightforward life is not possible then one must try to wriggle through by subtle maneuvers.” Poor Kafka! But then who among us can expect to live a pleasant, straightforward life? For most of us, much of the time, it is a slog, and Kafka’s subtle maneuvers are not so much a last resort as an ideal. Here’s to wriggling through.

## **W. H. Auden** (1907-1973)

“Routine, in an intelligent man, is a sign of ambition,” Auden wrote in 1958. If that’s true, then Auden himself was one of the most ambitious men of his generation. The poet was obsessively punctual and lived by an exacting timetable throughout his life. “He checks his watch over and over again,” a guest of Auden’s once noted. “Eating, drinking, writing, shopping, crossword puzzles, even the mailman’s arrival—all are timed to the minute and with accompanying routines.” Auden believed that a life of such military precision was essential to his creativity, a way of taming the muse to his own schedule. “A modern stoic,” he observed, “knows that the surest way to discipline passion is to discipline time: decide what you want or ought to do during the day, then always do it at exactly the same moment every day, and passion will give you no trouble.”

Auden rose shortly after 6:00 A.M., made himself coffee, and settled down to work quickly, perhaps after taking a first pass at the crossword. His mind was sharpest from 7:00 until 11:30 A.M., and he rarely failed to take advantage of these hours. (He was dismissive of night owls: “Only the ‘Hitlers of the world’ work at night; no honest artist does.”) Auden usually resumed his work after lunch and continued into the late afternoon. Cocktail hour began at 6:30 sharp, with the poet mixing him-

self and any guests several strong vodka martinis. Then dinner was served, with copious amounts of wine, followed by more wine and conversation. Auden went to bed early, never later than 11:00 and, as he grew older, closer to 9:30.

To maintain his energy and concentration, the poet relied on amphetamines, taking a dose of Benzedrine each morning the way many people take a daily multivitamin. At night, he used Seconal or another sedative to get to sleep. He continued this routine—"the chemical life," he called it—for twenty years, until the efficacy of the pills finally wore off. Auden regarded amphetamines as one of the "labor-saving devices" in the "mental kitchen," alongside alcohol, coffee, and tobacco—although he was well aware that "these mechanisms are very crude, liable to injure the cook, and constantly breaking down."

## **Francis Bacon** (1909-1992)

To the outside observer, Bacon appeared to thrive on disorder. His studios were environments of extreme chaos, with paint smeared on the walls and a knee-high jumble of books, brushes, papers, broken furniture, and other detritus piled on the floor. (More agreeable interiors stifled his creativity, he said.) And when he wasn't painting, Bacon lived a life of hedonistic excess, eating multiple rich meals a day, drinking tremendous quantities of alcohol, taking whatever stimulants were handy, and generally staying out later and partying harder than any of his contemporaries.



*Francis Bacon's London studio, 1971*

And yet, as the biographer Michael Peppiatt has written, Bacon was “essentially a creature of habit,” with a daily schedule that varied little over his career. Painting came first. Despite his late nights, Bacon always woke at the first light of day and worked for several hours, usually finishing around noon. Then another long afternoon and evening of carousing stretched before him, and Bacon did not dawdle. He would have a friend to the studio to share a bottle of wine, or he would head out for drinks at a pub, followed by a long lunch at a restaurant and then more drinks at a succession of private clubs. When evening arrived, there was a restaurant supper, a round of nightclubs, perhaps a visit to a casino, and often, in the early-morning hours, yet another meal at a bistro.

At the end of these long nights, Bacon frequently demanded that his reeling companions join him at home for one last drink—an effort, it seems, to postpone his nightly battles with insomnia. Bacon depended on pills to get to sleep, and he would read and reread classic cookbooks to relax himself before bed. He still slept only a few hours a night. Despite this, the painter's constitution was remarkably sturdy. His only exercise was pacing in front of a canvas, and his idea of dieting was to take large quantities of garlic pills and shun egg yolks, desserts, and coffee—while continuing to guzzle a half-dozen bottles of wine and eat two or more large restaurant meals a day. His metabolism could apparently handle the excessive consumption without dimming his wits or expanding his waistline. (At least, not until late in his life, when the drinking finally seemed to catch up with him.) Even the occasional hangover was, in Bacon's mind, a boon. "I often like working with a hangover," he said, "because my mind is crackling with energy and I can think very clearly."

### **Simone de Beauvoir** (1908-1986)

"I'm always in a hurry to get going, though in general I dislike starting the day," Beauvoir told *The Paris Review* in 1965. "I first have tea and then, at about ten o'clock, I get under way and work until one. Then I see my friends and after that, at five o'clock, I go back to work and continue until nine. I have no difficulty in picking up the thread in the afternoon." Indeed, Beauvoir rarely had dif-



*Simone de Beauvoir in her Paris apartment, 1976*

ficulty working; if anything, the opposite was true—when she took her annual two- or three-month vacations, she found herself growing bored and uncomfortable after a few weeks away from her work.

Although Beauvoir's work came first, her daily schedule also revolved around her relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre, which lasted from 1929 until his death in 1980. (Theirs was an intellectual partnership with a somewhat creepy sexual component; according to a pact proposed by Sartre at the outset of their relationship, both partners could take other lovers, but they were required to tell each other everything.) Generally, Beauvoir worked by herself in the morning, then joined Sartre for lunch. In the afternoon they worked together in silence at Sartre's



apartment. In the evening, they went to whatever political or social event was on Sartre's schedule, or else went to the movies or drank Scotch and listened to the radio at Beauvoir's apartment.

The filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, who was Beauvoir's lover from 1952 to 1959, experienced this arrangement firsthand. He described the beginning of their cohabitation in Beauvoir's Paris apartment:

On the first morning, I thought to lie in bed, but she got up, dressed and went to her work table. "You work there," she said, pointing at the bed. So I got up and sat on the edge of the bed and smoked and pretended that I was working. I don't think she said a word to me until it was time for lunch. Then she went to Sartre and they lunched; sometimes I joined them. Then in the afternoon she went to his place and they worked three, maybe four hours. Then there were meetings, rendezvous. Later we met for dinner, and almost always she and Sartre would go to sit alone and she would offer the critique of what he wrote that day. Then she and I would come back to the [apartment] and go to sleep. There were no parties, no receptions, no bourgeois values. We completely avoided all that. There was the presence only of essentials. It was an uncluttered kind of life, a simplicity deliberately constructed so that she could do her work.

## Thomas Wolfe (1900–1938)

Wolfe's prose has been criticized for its overindulgence and adolescent character, so it's interesting to note that the novelist practiced a writing ritual that was almost literally masturbatory. One evening in 1930, as he was struggling to recapture the feverish spirit that had fueled his first book, *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe decided to give up on an uninspired hour of work and get undressed for bed. But, standing naked at his hotel-room window, Wolfe found that his weariness had suddenly evaporated and that he was eager to write again. Returning to the table, he wrote until dawn with, he recalled, "amazing speed, ease, and sureness." Looking back, Wolfe tried to figure out what had prompted the sudden change—and realized that, at the window, he had been unconsciously fondling his genitals, a habit from childhood that, while not exactly sexual (his "penis remained limp and unaroused," he noted in a letter to his editor), fostered such a "good male feeling" that it had stoked his creative energies. From then on, Wolfe regularly used this method to inspire his writing sessions, dreamily exploring his "male configurations" until "the sensuous elements in every domain of life became more immediate, real, and beautiful."

Wolfe typically began writing around midnight, "priming himself with awesome quantities of tea and coffee," as one biographer noted. Since he could never find a chair or table that was totally comfortable for a man of his height (Wolfe was 6'6"), he usually wrote standing up, using the top of the refrigerator as his desk. He would keep at it

until dawn, taking breaks to smoke a cigarette at the window or pace through the apartment. Then he would have a drink and sleep until around 11:00. In the late morning Wolfe would begin another stretch of work, sometimes aided by a typist who would arrive to find the previous night's pages scattered all over the kitchen floor.

### **Patricia Highsmith** (1921-1995)

The author of such psychological thrillers as *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* was, in person, as solitary and misanthropic as some of her heroes. Writing was less a source of pleasure for her than a compulsion, without which she was miserable. "There is no real life except in working, that is to say in the imagination," she wrote in her journal. Fortunately, Highsmith was rarely short of inspiration; she had ideas, she said, like rats have orgasms.

Highsmith wrote daily, usually for three or four hours in the morning, completing two thousand words on a good day. The biographer Andrew Wilson records her methods:

Her favourite technique to ease herself into the right frame of mind for work was to sit on her bed surrounded by cigarettes, ashtray, matches, a mug of coffee, a doughnut and an accompanying saucer of sugar. She had to avoid any sense of discipline and make the act of writing as pleasurable as possible. Her position, she noted, would be almost foetal



*Patricia Highsmith, Paris, 1977*

and, indeed, her intention was to create, she said, “a womb of her own.”

Highsmith was also in the habit of having a stiff drink before she started to write—“not to perk her up,” Wilson notes, “but to reduce her energy levels, which veered toward the manic.” In her later years, as she became a hardened drinker with a high tolerance, she kept a bottle of vodka by her bedside, reaching for it as soon as she woke and marking the bottle to set her limit for the day. She was also a chain smoker for most of her life, going through a pack of Gauloises a day. In matters of food, she was indifferent. One acquaintance remembered that “she only ever ate American bacon, fried eggs and cereal, all at odd times of the day.”

Ill at ease around most people, she had an unusually intense connection with animals—particularly cats, but also snails, which she bred at home. Highsmith was inspired to keep the gastropods as pets when she saw a pair at a fish market locked in a strange embrace. (She later told a radio interviewer that “they give me a sort of tranquility.”) She eventually housed three hundred snails in her garden in Suffolk, England, and once arrived at a London cocktail party carrying a gigantic handbag that contained a head of lettuce and a hundred snails—her companions for the evening, she said. When she later moved to France, Highsmith had to get around the prohibition against bringing live snails into the country. So she smuggled them in, making multiple trips across the border with six to ten of the creatures hidden under each breast.

## **Federico Fellini** (1920–1993)

The Italian filmmaker claimed that he was unable to sleep for more than three hours at a time. In a 1977 interview, he described his morning routine:

I'm up at six in the morning. I walk around the house, open windows, poke around boxes, move books from here to there. For years I've been trying to make myself a decent cup of coffee, but it's not one of my specialties. I go downstairs, outside as soon as possible. By seven I'm on the telephone. I'm scrupulous about choosing who it's safe to wake at seven in the morning without their getting insulted.

For some I perform a real service, a wake-up service; they become used to my waking them at seven or so.

Fellini wrote for newspapers as a young man, but he found that his temperament was better suited to the movies—he liked the sociability of the filmmaking process. “A writer can do everything by himself—but he needs discipline,” he said. “He has to get up at seven in the morning, and be alone in a room with a white sheet of paper. I am too much of a *vitellone* [loafer] to do that. I think I have chosen the best medium of expression for myself. I love the very precious combination of work and of living-together that filmmaking offers.”

## **Ingmar Bergman** (1918-2007)

“Do you know what moviemaking is?” Bergman asked in a 1964 interview. “Eight hours of hard work each day to get three minutes of film. And during those eight hours there are maybe only ten or twelve minutes, if you’re lucky, of real creation. And maybe they don’t come. Then you have to gear yourself for another eight hours and pray you’re going to get your good ten minutes this time.” But moviemaking for Bergman was also writing scripts, which he always did in his home on the remote island of Fårö, Sweden. There he followed essentially the same schedule for decades: up at 8:00, writing from 9:00 until noon, then an austere meal. “He constantly eats the same lunch,” the actress Bibi Andersson remembered. “It doesn’t change. It’s some kind of whipped sour milk, very

fat, and strawberry jam, very sweet—a strange kind of baby food he eats with corn flakes.”

After lunch, Bergman worked again from 1:00 to 3:00, then slept for an hour. In the late afternoon he went for a walk or took the ferry to a neighboring island to pick up the newspapers and the mail. In the evening he read, saw friends, screened a movie from his large collection, or watched TV (he was particularly fond of *Dallas*). “I never use drugs or alcohol,” Bergman said. “The most I drink is a glass of wine and that makes me incredibly happy.” Music was also “absolutely necessary” for him, and Bergman enjoyed everything from Bach to the Rolling Stones. As he got older, he had trouble sleeping, never managing more than four or five hours a night, which made shooting films arduous. But even after he retired from filmmaking in 1982, Bergman continued to make television movies, direct plays and operas, and write plays, novels, and a memoir. “I have been working all the time,” he said, “and it’s like a flood going through the landscape of your soul. It’s good because it takes away a lot. It’s cleansing. If I hadn’t been at work all the time, I would have been a lunatic.”

## **Morton Feldman** (1926-1987)

A French journalist visited Feldman in 1971, when the American composer was taking a month to work in a small village about an hour north of Paris. “I live here like a monk,” Feldman said.

I get up at six in the morning. I compose until eleven, then my day is over. I go out, I walk, tirelessly, for hours. Max Ernst is not far away. [John] Cage also came here. I'm cut off from all other activity. What effect does that have on me?

Very good . . . But I'm not used to having so much time, so much ease. Usually I create in the midst of a lot of bustle, of work. You know, I always worked at something other than music. My parents were in "business" and I participated in their worries, in their life. . . .

Then, I got married, my wife had a very good job and she was out all day. I got up at six in the morning, I did the shopping, the meals, the housework, I worked like mad and in the evening we received a lot of friends (I had so many friends without even realizing it myself). At the end of the year, I discovered that I had not written a single note of music!

When he did find the time to compose, Feldman employed a strategy that John Cage taught him—it was "the most important advice anybody ever gave me," Feldman told a lecture audience in 1984. "He said that it's a very good idea that after you write a little bit, stop and then copy it. Because while you're copying it, you're thinking about it, and it's giving you other ideas. And that's the way I work. And it's marvelous, just wonderful, the relationship between working and copying." External conditions—having the right pen, a good chair—were important, too. Feldman wrote in a 1965 essay, "My concern at times is nothing more than establishing a series



of practical considerations that will enable me to work. For years I said if I could only find a comfortable chair I would rival Mozart.”

## **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–1791)

In 1781, after several years searching in vain for a suitable post with the European nobility, Mozart decided to settle in Vienna as a freelance composer and performer. There were ample opportunities in the city for a musician of Mozart’s talent and renown, but staying solvent necessitated a frantic round of piano lessons, concert performances, and social visits with the city’s wealthy patrons. At the same time, Mozart was also courting his future wife, Constanze, under the disapproving gaze of her mother. All this activity left him only a few hours a day to compose new works. In a 1782 letter to his sister, he gave a detailed account of these hectic days in Vienna:

My hair is always done by six o’clock in the morning and by seven I am fully dressed. I then compose until nine. From nine to one I give lessons. Then I lunch, unless I am invited to some house where they lunch at two or even three o’clock, as, for example, today and tomorrow at Countess Zichy’s and Countess Thun’s. I can never work before five or six o’clock in the evening, and even then I am often prevented by a concert. If I am not prevented, I compose until nine. I then go to my dear Constanze, though the joy of seeing one another is nearly always spoilt

by her mother's bitter remarks. . . . At half past ten or eleven I come home—it depends on her mother's darts and on my capacity to endure them! As I cannot rely on being able to compose in the evening owing to the concerts which are taking place and also to the uncertainty as to whether I may not be summoned now here and now there, it is my custom (especially if I get home early) to compose a little before going to bed. I often go on writing until one—and am up again at six.

“Altogether I have so much to do that often I do not know whether I am on my head or my heels,” Mozart wrote to his father. Apparently he was not exaggerating; when Leopold Mozart went to visit his son a few years later, he found the freelancer's life just as tumultuous as promised. He wrote home from Vienna, “It is impossible for me to describe the rush and bustle.”

## **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770-1827)

Beethoven rose at dawn and wasted little time getting down to work. His breakfast was coffee, which he prepared himself with great care—he determined that there should be sixty beans per cup, and he often counted them out one by one for a precise dose. Then he sat at his desk and worked until 2:00 or 3:00, taking the occasional break to walk outdoors, which aided his creativity. (Perhaps for this reason, Beethoven's productivity was generally higher during the warmer months.)

After a midday dinner, Beethoven embarked on a long, vigorous walk, which would occupy much of the rest of the afternoon. He always carried a pencil and a couple of sheets of music paper in his pocket, to record chance musical thoughts. As the day wound down, he might stop at a tavern to read the newspapers. Evenings were often spent with company or at the theater, although in winter he preferred to stay home and read. Supper was usually a simple affair—a bowl of soup, say, and some leftovers from dinner. Beethoven enjoyed wine with his food, and he liked to have a glass of beer and a pipe after supper. He rarely worked on his music in the evening, and he retired early, going to bed at 10:00 at the latest.

Beethoven's unusual bathing habits are worth noting here. His pupil and secretary Anton Schindler recalled them in the biography *Beethoven As I Knew Him*:

Washing and bathing were among the most pressing necessities of Beethoven's life. In this respect he was indeed an Oriental: to his way of thinking Mohammed did not exaggerate a whit in the number of ablutions he prescribed. If he did not dress to go out during the morning working hours, he would stand in great *déshabillé* at his washstand and pour large pitchers of water over his hands, bellowing up and down the scale or sometimes humming loudly to himself. Then he would stride around his room with rolling or staring eyes, jot something down, then resume his pouring of water and loud singing. These were moments of deep meditation, to which no one could have objected but for two unfortunate

consequences. First of all, the servants would often burst out laughing. This made the master angry and he would sometimes assault them in language that made him cut an even more ridiculous figure. Or, secondly, he would come into conflict with the landlord, for all too often so much water was spilled that it went right through the floor. This was one of the main reasons for Beethoven's unpopularity as a tenant. The floor of his living-room would have had to be covered with asphalt to prevent all that water from seeping through. And the master was totally unaware of the excess of inspiration under his feet!

## **Søren Kierkegaard** (1813-1855)

The Danish philosopher's day was dominated by two pursuits: writing and walking. Typically, he wrote in the morning, set off on a long walk through Copenhagen at noon, and then returned to his writing for the rest of the day and into the evening. The walks were where he had his best ideas, and sometimes he would be in such a hurry to get them down that, returning home, he would write standing up before his desk, still wearing his hat and gripping his walking stick or umbrella.

Kierkegaard kept up his energy with coffee, usually taken after supper and a glass of sherry. Israel Levin, his secretary from 1844 until 1850, recalled that Kierkegaard owned "at least fifty sets of cups and saucers, but only one of each sort"—and that, before coffee could be served,

Levin had to select which cup and saucer he preferred that day, and then, bizarrely, justify his choice to Kierkegaard. And this was not the end of the strange ritual. The biographer Joakim Garff writes:

Kierkegaard had his own quite peculiar way of having coffee: Delightedly he seized hold of the bag containing the sugar and poured sugar into the coffee cup until it was piled up above the rim. Next came the incredibly strong, black coffee, which slowly dissolved the white pyramid. The process was scarcely finished before the syrupy stimulant disappeared into the magister's stomach, where it mingled with the sherry to produce additional energy that percolated up into his seething and bubbling brain—which in any case had already been so productive all day that in the half-light Levin could still notice the tingling and throbbing in the overworked fingers when they grasped the slender handle of the cup.

## **Voltaire** (1694-1778)

The French Enlightenment writer and philosopher liked to work in bed, particularly in his later years. A visitor recorded Voltaire's routine in 1774: He spent the morning in bed, reading and dictating new work to one of his secretaries. At noon he rose and got dressed. Then he would receive visitors or, if there were none, continue to work, taking coffee and chocolate for sustenance. (He

did not eat lunch.) Between 2:00 and 4:00, Voltaire and his principal secretary, Jean-Louis Wagnière, went out in a carriage to survey the estate. Then he worked again until 8:00, when he would join his widowed niece (and longtime lover) Madame Denis and others for supper. But his working day did not end there. Voltaire often continued to give dictation after supper, continuing deep into the night. Wagnière estimated that, all told, they worked eighteen to twenty hours a day. For Voltaire, it was a perfect arrangement. “I love the cell,” he wrote.

## **Benjamin Franklin** (1706-1790)

In his *Autobiography*, Franklin famously outlined a scheme to achieve “moral perfection” according to a thirteen-week plan. Each week was devoted to a particular virtue—temperance, cleanliness, moderation, et cetera—and his offenses against these virtues were tracked on a calendar. Franklin thought that if he could maintain his devotion to one virtue for an entire week, it would become a habit; then he could move on to the next virtue, successively making fewer and fewer offenses (indicated on the calendar by a black mark) until he had completely reformed himself and would thereafter need only occasional bouts of moral maintenance.

The plan worked, up to a point. After following the course several times in a row, he found it necessary to go through just one course in a year, and then one every few years. But the virtue of *order*—“Let all your things

DAILY RITUALS

have their places; let each part of your business have its time”—appears to have eluded his grasp. Franklin was not naturally inclined to keep his papers and other possessions organized, and he found the effort so vexing that he almost quit in frustration. Moreover, the demands of his printing business meant that he couldn't always follow the exacting daily timetable that he set for himself. That ideal schedule, also recorded in Franklin's little book of virtues, looked like this:

SCHEME.		
	Hours.	
<b>MORNING.</b> The <i>Question.</i> What good shall I do this day?	{ 5	Rise, wash, and address <i>Powerful Goodness!</i> Con- trive day's business, and take the resolution of the day; prosecute the present study, and breakfast.
	{ 6	
	{ 7	
	{ 8	Work.
	{ 9	
	{ 10	
	{ 11	
<b>NOON.</b>	{ 12	Read, or look over my accounts, and dine.
	{ 1	
<b>AFTERNOON.</b>	{ 2	Work.
	{ 3	
	{ 4	
	{ 5	
<b>EVENING.</b> The <i>Question.</i> What good have I done to-day?	{ 6	Put things in their places. Supper. Music or diversion, or conversa- tion. Examination of the day.
	{ 7	
	{ 8	
	{ 9	
<b>NIGHT.</b>	{ 10	Sleep.
	{ 11	
	{ 12	
	{ 1	
	{ 2	
	{ 3	
	{ 4	

*Benjamin Franklin's ideal daily routine, from his autobiography*

This timetable was formulated before Franklin adopted a favorite habit of his later years—his daily “air bath.” At the time, baths in cold water were considered a tonic, but Franklin believed the cold was too much of a shock to the system. He wrote in a letter:

I have found it much more agreeable to my constitution to bathe in another element, I mean cold air. With this view I rise early almost every morning, and sit in my chamber without any clothes whatever, half an hour or an hour, according to the season, either reading or writing. This practice is not in the least painful, but on the contrary, agreeable; and if I return to bed afterwards, before I dress myself, as sometimes happens, I make a supplement to my night’s rest, of one or two hours of the most pleasing sleep that can be imagined.

## **Anthony Trollope** (1815-1882)

Trollope managed to produce forty-seven novels and sixteen other books by dint of an unvarying early-morning writing session. In his *Autobiography*, Trollope described his composition methods at Waltham Cross, England, where he lived for twelve years. For most of that time he was also employed as a civil servant at the General Post Office, a career he began in 1834 and did not resign until thirty-three years later, when he had already published more than two dozen books.



It was my practice to be at my table every morning at 5.30 A.M.; and it was also my practice to allow myself no mercy. An old groom, whose business it was to call me, and to whom I paid £5 a year extra for the duty, allowed himself no mercy. During all those years at Waltham Cross he never was once late with the coffee which it was his duty to bring me. I do not know that I ought not to feel that I owe more to him than to any one else for the success I have had. By beginning at that hour I could complete my literary work before I dressed for breakfast.

All those I think who have lived as literary men,—working daily as literary labourers,—will agree with me that three hours a day will produce as much as a man ought to write. But then, he should so have trained himself that he shall be able to work continuously during those three hours,—so have tutored his mind that it shall not be necessary for him to sit nibbling his pen, and gazing at the wall before him, till he shall have found the words with which he wants to express his ideas. It had at this time become my custom,—and is still my custom, though of late I have become a little lenient of myself,—to write with my watch before me, and to require of myself 250 words every quarter of an hour. I have found that the 250 words have been forthcoming as regularly as my watch went. But my three hours were not devoted entirely to writing. I always began my task by reading the work of the day before, an operation which would take me half an hour, and which consisted chiefly in weighing with my ear the sound of the words and phrases. . . .

This division of time allowed me to produce over ten pages of an ordinary novel volume a day, and if kept up through ten months, would have given as its results three novels of three volumes each in the year;—the precise amount which so greatly acerbated the publisher in Paternoster Row, and which must at any rate be felt to be quite as much as the novel-readers of the world can want from the hands of one man.

If he completed a novel before his three hours were up, Trollope would take out a fresh sheet of paper and immediately begin the next one. In his industrious habits he was no doubt influenced by his mother, Frances Trollope, an immensely popular author in her own right. She did not begin writing until the age of fifty-three, and then only because she desperately needed money to support her six children and ailing husband. In order to squeeze the necessary writing time out of the day while still acting as the primary caregiver to her family, Mrs. Trollope sat down at her desk each day at 4:00 A.M. and completed her writing in time to serve breakfast.

## **Jane Austen** (1775-1817)

Austen never lived alone and had little expectation of solitude in her daily life. Her final home, a cottage in the village of Chawton, England, was no exception: she lived there with her mother, her sister, a close friend, and three servants, and there was a steady stream of visitors, often

unannounced. Nevertheless, between settling in Chawton in 1809 and her death, Austen was remarkably productive: she revised earlier versions of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* for publication, and wrote three new novels, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*.

Austen wrote in the family sitting room, “subject to all kinds of casual interruptions,” her nephew recalled.

She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants, or visitors, or any persons beyond her own family party. She wrote upon small sheets of paper which could easily be put away, or covered with a piece of blotting paper. There was, between the front door and the offices, a swing door which creaked when it was opened; but she objected to having this little inconvenience remedied, because it gave her notice when anyone was coming.

Austen rose early, before the other women were up, and played the piano. At 9:00 she organized the family breakfast, her one major piece of household work. Then she settled down to write in the sitting room, often with her mother and sister sewing quietly nearby. If visitors showed up, she would hide her papers and join in the sewing. Dinner, the main meal of the day, was served between 3:00 and 4:00. Afterward there was conversation, card games, and tea. The evening was spent reading aloud from novels, and during this time Austen would read her work-in-progress to her family.

Although she did not have the independence and privacy that a contemporary writer might expect, Austen was nonetheless fortunate with the arrangements at

Chawton. Her family was respectful of her work, and her sister Cassandra shouldered the bulk of the house-running burden—a huge relief for the novelist, who once wrote, “Composition seems to me impossible with a head full of joints of mutton & doses of rhubarb.”

## **Frédéric Chopin** (1810-1849)

During his ten-year relationship with the French novelist George Sand, Chopin spent most of his summers at Sand’s country estate in Nohant, in central France. Chopin was an urban animal; in the country, he quickly became bored and moody. But the lack of distractions was good for his music. Most days he rose late, had breakfast in his bedroom, and spent the day composing, with a break to give a piano lesson to Sand’s daughter, Solange. At 6:00 P.M. the household assembled for dinner, often served outdoors, followed by music, conversation, and sundry entertainments. Then Chopin retired to bed while Sand went to her writing table (see p. 156).

Although his lack of any real responsibility at Nohant made it easier for Chopin to compose, his work process was still far from effortless. Sand noted his work habits:

His creation was spontaneous and miraculous. He found it without seeking it, without foreseeing it. It came on his piano suddenly, complete, sublime, or it sang in his head during a walk, and he was impatient to play it to himself. But then began the most heart-rending labour I ever saw. It was a series



*Frédéric Chopin sketched by George Sand, circa 1842*

of efforts, of irresolutions, and of frettings to seize again certain details of the theme he had heard; what he had conceived as a whole he analysed too much when wishing to write it, and his regret at not finding it again, in his opinion, clearly defined, threw him into a kind of despair. He shut himself up in his room for whole days, weeping, walking, breaking his pens, repeating and altering a bar a hundred times, writing and effacing it as many times, and recommencing the next day with a minute and desperate perseverance. He spent six weeks over a single page to write it at last as he had noted it down at the very first.

Sand tried to convince Chopin to trust his initial inspiration, but he was loath to take her advice, and became angry when disturbed. “I dared not insist,” Sand wrote. “Chopin when angry was alarming, and as, with me, he always restrained himself, he seemed almost to choke and die.”

## Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880)

Flaubert began writing *Madame Bovary* in September 1851, shortly after returning to his mother’s house in Croisset, France. He had spent the previous two years abroad, traveling through the Mediterranean region, and the long journey seems to have satisfied his youthful yearning for adventure and passion. Now, just shy of his thirtieth birthday—and already looking middle-aged,



*Gustave Flaubert's study at Croisset*

with a large paunch and rapidly thinning hair—Flaubert felt capable of the discipline necessary for writing his new book, which would marry a humble subject matter to a rigorous and exacting prose style.

The book gave him trouble from the start. “Last night I began my novel,” he wrote his longtime correspondent and lover, Louise Colet. “Now I foresee terrifying difficulties of style. It’s no easy business to be simple.” In order to concentrate on the task, Flaubert established a strict routine that allowed him to write for several hours each night—he was easily distracted by noises in the daytime—while also fulfilling some basic familial obligations. (At the Croisset house there were, in addition to the author and his doting mother, Flaubert’s precocious five-year-old niece, Caroline; her English governess; and, frequently, Flaubert’s uncle.)

Flaubert woke at 10:00 each morning and rang for the servant, who brought him the newspapers, his mail, a glass of cold water, and his filled pipe. The servant’s bell also served as notice for the rest of the family that they could cease creeping about the house and speaking in low voices in order not to disturb the slumbering author. After Flaubert had opened his letters, drank his water, and taken a few puffs of his pipe, he would pound on the wall above his head, a signal for his mother to come in and sit on the bed beside him for an intimate chat until he decided to get up. Flaubert’s morning toilet, which included a very hot bath and the application of a tonic that was supposed to arrest hair loss, would be completed by 11:00, at which time he would join the family in the dining room for a late-morning meal that served as both his breakfast and his lunch. The author didn’t like to

work on a full stomach, so he ate a relatively light repast, typically consisting of eggs, vegetables, cheese or fruit, and a cup of cold chocolate. Then the family moved outdoors for a stroll, often ascending a hill behind the house to a terrace that overlooked the Seine, where they would gossip, argue, and smoke under a stand of chestnut trees.

At 1:00, Flaubert commenced his daily lesson to Caroline, which took place in his study, a large room with bookcases crammed with books, a sofa, and a white bearskin rug. The governess was in charge of Caroline's English education, so Flaubert limited his lessons to history and geography, a role that he took very seriously. After an hour of instruction, Flaubert dismissed his pupil and settled into the high-backed armchair in front of his large round table and did some work—mostly reading, it seems—until dinner at 7:00. After a meal, he sat and talked with his mother until 9:00 or 10:00, when she went to bed. Then his real work began. Hunched over his table while the rest of the household slept, the “hermit of Croisset” struggled to forge a new prose style, one stripped of all unnecessary ornament and excessive emotion in favor of merciless realism rendered in precisely the right words. This word-by-word and sentence-by-sentence labor proved almost unbearably difficult:

Sometimes I don't understand why my arms don't drop from my body with fatigue, why my brain doesn't melt away. I am leading an austere life, stripped of all external pleasure, and am sustained only by a kind of permanent frenzy, which sometimes makes me weep tears of impotence but never abates. I love my work with a love that is frantic and per-



verted, as an ascetic loves the hair shirt that scratches his belly. Sometimes, when I am empty, when words don't come, when I find I haven't written a single sentence after scribbling whole pages, I collapse on my couch and lie there dazed, bogged down in a swamp of despair, hating myself and blaming myself for this demented pride that makes me pant after a chimera. A quarter of an hour later, everything has changed; my heart is pounding with joy.

Often he complained of his slow progress. "*Bovary* is not exactly racing along: two pages in a week! Sometimes I'm so discouraged I could jump out a window." But, gradually, the pages began to pile up. On Sundays, his good friend Louis Bouilhet would visit and Flaubert would read aloud his week's progress. Together they would go over sentences dozens, even hundreds, of times until they were just right. Bouilhet's suggestions and encouragement bolstered Flaubert's confidence and helped calm his frazzled nerves for another week of slow, torturous composition. This monotonous daily struggle continued, with few breaks, until June 1856, when, after nearly five years of labor, Flaubert finally mailed the manuscript to his publisher. And yet, as difficult as the writing was, it was in many ways an ideal life for Flaubert. "After all," as he wrote years later, "work is still the best way of escaping from life!"