

# DIY writing *retreats*

by Kathryn Haueisen

Too busy to write?  
No budget to get away?  
Setting aside a time  
and place for your writing  
can be easier than  
you think.

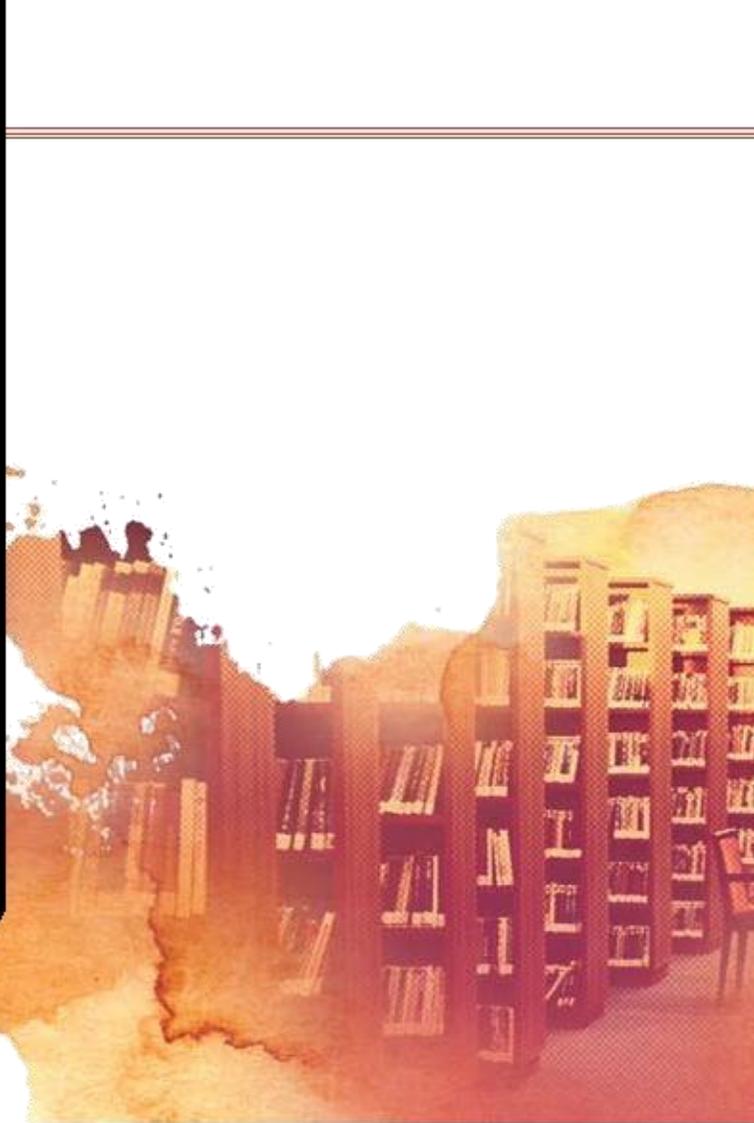


I started writing for publication in college—but then a marriage and two children within five years of graduation nearly ended my writing career before I got started. It wasn't until my children started preschool that I began to retrieve the writing part of my life. I'd haul my trusty portable typewriter (no laptops back then) to a borrowed office (an empty church classroom, to be exact) and write during the few hours a week the kids were in school. I paid nothing for the space and worked with laser focus knowing these few quiet hours were the only ones I'd get. I produced—and sold—enough freelance articles

during those brief writing “retreats” to finance several family vacations.

Later, I expanded my retreats to include an annual week away—alone—to focus on reading, researching and writing. Whether retreating to our family RV at a state park, a friend's vacant vacation home or a designated retreat center, I've always come back energized and full of ideas for new projects. I've also managed to meet deadlines I surely would have missed without that time to really focus. These retreats have enabled me to continue to write while earning a master's degree, working full time and raising a family. My children are now grown and I'm partially retired, but I still maintain the writing retreat habit. In fact, I consider it my secret weapon.

Knowing how hard it is to squeeze writing time into an already packed life might make the idea of a retreat seem impossible. But regardless of the volume of your time commitments—or the state of your personal economy—you can take time away to focus on writing projects. The key is to be flexible and creative. Here's how to get started.





### Rethink your definition of a retreat.

Sure, it'd be wonderful to spend a week, month or more at a private villa overlooking the ocean; that's a great goal for later. For now, consider a retreat to be any opportunity to treat yourself to a quiet place where you can work uninterrupted for a few hours. I recently used a local coffee shop to finish a book manuscript. For the price of a cup of Earl Grey, I carved out a few hours a day to work away. If you're like me, you can focus better when you pack up your laptop and leave home to write. At home it's all too easy to sort mail, plan menus or do laundry.

### Commit to yourself.

Make a commitment—go ahead, put it in writing—that you need, deserve and can have a writing retreat. You may have to start with 20 minutes of solitude locked in the bathroom or parked somewhere in your car to get started. You may have to train those around you to honor your time alone. But once you establish the routine of regular writing retreats, the subconscious mind gets to work helping you achieve your goals. A writing coach recently told

me an author she'd interviewed had claimed he wrote a novel a year by taking only 20 minutes a day of concentrated writing time. If he can do it, why not you?

### Create a portable writing kit.

Just because you'll be writing remotely doesn't mean you have to be out of your element. Gather materials that will help any space feel like your own personal retreat. This may include inspirational or instructional books and magazines, sample copies of publications you'd like to query, a notebook to record goals and ideas, a journal and pens, and/or your laptop. You might also pack an MP3 player stocked with favorite music to write by, and perhaps a photo or piece of art that inspires you. Have it all at the ready in a bag or backpack so you can take advantage of every opportunity to get up and go.

### Set a goal for each retreat.

Write down what you want to accomplish in the time you're dedicating to your writing. Be realistic and specific. Maybe you want to research potential markets for



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your work. Perhaps you need some focused time to conduct research for a piece, or to review background materials you've already gathered. Even relaxing and doing "nothing" count as valid goals; great ideas often come while we're gazing at a field of wildflowers or strolling through a park. The more specific you can be, the more likely you'll achieve what you set out to do. Even if you don't, you'll likely find you've still accomplished far more than if you hadn't taken the retreat at all.

### Start small.

Plan the logistics of a mini retreat. Determine exactly when (day and time) and for how long (whether 30 minutes or a whole afternoon) you plan to step away from work, family or other obligations—then stick to it. Decide where you will go. As I mentioned earlier, coffee shops are among my favorite places to settle in and write. Here are a few other low- to no-cost places you may not have thought of:

- Libraries
- Community parks and playgrounds with picnic tables
- The homes of friends or relatives who are away
- Unused rooms at local community centers or worship places
- Hotel lobbies
- Hospital chapels
- Quiet rooms at YMCAs or other health clubs
- Local bookstores with designated reading corners

What other places might be available to you? Some are ripe for anyone's taking. For others, I've found that all you have to do is ask. Really!

### Take a bigger leap.

When you see the effect short retreats are having on your writing, you may begin fantasizing about a longer one. That doesn't have to mean setting aside a whole weekend or a full week. I've found that for an investment of \$100 you could try one of these overnight retreat options:

- A hotel room where the pool, hot tub or exercise room provide a nice break between work sessions
- A cabin at a state or national park
- A rented RV or camper unit in a quiet place with electric hookups

- A room at a designated retreat center (some even include meals; look them up at [aca.org](http://aca.org), or search online for retreat centers of any denomination)

Let your retreat budget grow as your body of sold work expands. Then, explore what you can *really* do with that time and money.

### Get creative.

Don't be afraid to experiment with different formats and see what works best for you and your writing.

I once spent a week at a silent retreat center, and found that the silence was golden. It meant no pressure to socialize with strangers over meals. I had nothing to do but think, read and write. If the cost of such a retreat is too high for you, try asking about a work/write exchange; many such organizations rely on volunteers to operate. You might volunteer a few hours a day helping with maintenance or office work in exchange for a quiet place to write the rest of the day.

If you have a particular passion or area of expertise, you could offer to be a guest in residence for a week or so at a college or university. You make yourself available to students and faculty to discuss your field, talk with interesting people, and have time to write away the other hours the day. Twice I spent a week at a fully furnished college apartment where I paid only a very modest price for meals in the dining hall. As a guest, I chatted with professors and students and attended a few classes. I also soaked up the stimulation of the academic setting and worked on my own writing projects.

Of course, there are also established group retreats and conferences, many of which involve instructional sessions and critiques—as well as registration fees and, sometimes, travel. Getting in the habit of creating your own retreats can equip you to make the most of those investments if and when you decide to make them.

Start small, set realistic specific goals, reward yourself when you succeed and forgive yourself when you don't. There's always tomorrow.

Regular writing retreats help you stay motivated, inspired and productive. Our brains and bodies need regular rest breaks. Writing retreats are to creativity what a good night's sleep is to physical well-being. You and your writing will both benefit. **WD**

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Through the use of writing retreats, Kathryn Hau Eisen has sold dozens of articles, written two books and edited two others.