



THE WRITING LIFE

How I Learned to Live Without Cable

by Gregory Hahn
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My wife finally called my repeated empty bluff recently and cancelled our cable. And I'm not talking about just the ten channels of HBO and the rest of the high-end package we once thought we needed, but the whole shebang. No local channels, no public television, not even the Spanish and religious stations with broadcast signals strong enough to reach Mars.

Now our televisions, we have two, sadly, stare blankly at us while we try to make small talk and engage in the kind of life-building activities we both swore were just one medical reality show (for her) or repeat of "Scrubs" (for me) away.

This drastic change in our free time has yet to really manifest in the way I had hoped, of course. It was designed to boost my time spent Writing.

Not writing, mind you, with a lower-case "w." I do that all the time. I get up and head to my Idaho Statesman office in the basement of the Statehouse and commence to lower-case writing for the next eight to ten hours, five days a week all year. I get paid a decent wage for all this writing, too.

And often—not every day, but often—the stuff I do here in my newspaper desk is Writing. Big-W Writing. I love Joan Didion and Martha Gellhorn as much as I like Hemingway and Steve Almond, and I think big-W Writing is a great way convey the

facts as they happened. But I also enjoy conveying facts as they never happened, but maybe should have happened or could have happened, and for that, I need my early mornings and my late evenings at home and I need to pull myself away from the SportsCenter highlights of the football game I just finished watching.

I have to say, though, that it's hard to write all day and then go home and Write. Some days I envy janitors and waiters and even math teachers or engineers or anybody who can use one part of their brain for their vocation and another for their passion.

This way, I end up with two different writing styles and two different writing personalities. I like them both, incidentally, but it can feel schizophrenic at times.

As a newspaper writer, I can bang out a thousand-word news story in no time, packed with information and a broad array of sources, punchy from the start and punctuated with pithy quotes. I wrote more than 200 stories last year alone.

When I'm Writing, though, I plod. I struggle for a page. I burst in fits and starts and let ideas and scenes and characters dangle and fade with the shock of having just been created a few hundred short words before. My approach to starting a novel, I discovered recently, is evidently to check out every book in the library about Indiana in the 1920s and then not read them until they're overdue.

While I've planned my whole life to Write, I didn't finish my first serious stab at a short story until 2002, when then-adjunct professor Tony Doerr and a group of Boise State MFA candidates who would go on to become some of my closest friends informed me that it really wasn't a short story at all, but a half-decent array of sentences. I tried again. And again. But slowly. Numbingly slowly.

In the five years since, I have finished maybe five stories—meaning I've finished them to the point I would dare show them to editors. I keep sitting down at that computer though. Keep scribbling ideas in the back of my notebooks. I love my day job. That writing is still my bread and butter. But my Writing, that's the morning jam on my toast.

Gregory Hahn covers state government, sports emergencies and other special projects at *The Idaho Statesman*. His fiction has appeared in *Swink* magazine and the *Adirondack Review*.