

What will you write this year? A novel? Self-help book? A memoir in essays? You can get there—but you have to take that dream—“I’m going to write a book!”—and turn it into clear, measurable goals that allow you to track your progress. As editor Pat Walsh says, the number one reason your book will never be published is because *you haven’t written it yet*. Writing takes time, persistence and consistency—but it also rewards them. If you make a decision to put your butt in the chair for a certain number of minutes or words every day, you’ll write a book—or a blog, or a series of essays, or a manifesto on raising heirloom pigs. You’ll get there. But you have to set goals, and you have to follow through.

Every year on the [#AmWriting podcast](#), Jessica Lahey, Sarina Bowen and I talk writerly goals: specifically, what makes a good goal, and how to set some, whether it’s for New Year’s, or your own personal New Year’s. We’re really talking about that moment when you decide, **this is it. I start now.** (And we revisit that moment multiple times throughout the year.)

We also created a goal-setting worksheet to help you define those goals, and give you something visual to return to as you reach them. You’ll find the worksheet at the end of this ebook.

On our very first goal-setting podcast (Episode 34, back in 2016) we started off by defining a goal by what it’s not—it’s not a resolution. Resolutions are often big and amorphous, hard to measure and somewhat doomed. (“I will be kinder. I will be a better daughter. I will get healthier.”) A goal, on the other hand, at least as we’ve planned it, may be big—but it’s also clearly defined and achievable, with measurable markers along the way.

We stick to that definition, although we vary in how many goals we set and what kinds of markers we give ourselves to measure progress.

Here’s how to set Writer’s Goals that get you where you want to be by next month or next year.

Take time to do this right. The biggest obstacle that stands in the way of actually deciding what you want to do is how busy you get doing all the things. You sit down with your calendar intending to make big goals, and you emerge half an hour later with a grocery list and a detailed plan for your 4-year-old’s birthday party.

Turn off the internet, close the door, pour a glass of your favorite sparkly seltzer or wine and think. Doodle. Draw timelines. Dream. When you look back at these pages in a few months, what do you want to have done?

Make a Rough Draft. Goal-setting can be paralyzing! What if I aim too high or too low? Or, on a more mundane level, what if my goal worksheet or page in my calendar or journal isn’t pretty enough for the Instagram? I got a little caught up in both of those this year.

If you’re the same, make a rough draft. Scribble some goals somewhere non-threatening. Back of an envelope. Bottom of a to-do list. (You can see me in process on [my own Instagram](#), where I posted both the pretty pretty picture and the very messy WIP.)

Transfer them later. Or don't. And remember, goals are changeable things. You'll be checking in with them. Changing them. Growing with them. By the end of the year, even the pretty-pretty picture should not be so pretty.

Name your Achievement Goals. These are things you'd like to have done by year's end. One challenge of achievement goals is that you can't always control the outcome, so here's our advice: set both goals you can control, and goals you can't—and then **give each goal three steps that you yourself can do.**

Your goal may be to get an essay into the New York Times' Modern Love column. You can't control that—but if you don't submit at least one essay, you guarantee failure. And if you don't write that essay, you're really sunk. And if you never start it? Yep. Doomed.

Try setting two goals you wholly control (finish a novel, a book proposal, an essay) and two you don't (get an agent, break into a dream publication). Write down three steps you can take, just you, towards making all four of those goals happen.

Time Horizons Next question: when? If step one is start an essay, when will you type that first word? How long does an essay take you? How much work time do you typically have?

You can make like a business and set your goals quarterly. Q1 ends March 31, my friends. What will you have done by then? Or plan backwards—if you want to be querying agents in May, what do you have to have done in March? Alternatively, especially if you're a parent, you may want to go with [this three-New-Years-approach from organizer and host of the podcast Organize 365 Lisa Woodruff](#): one now, one in May and one in September. If you do that, set your January goals with a May deadline in mind. Remember that August is a publishing world dead zone, whereas September marks a time for yet another set of fresh starts, and plan accordingly.

Create baby steps establish progress markers. If the steps under those big goals are also big goals (like writing that perfect Modern Love essay), break them down. If your goal is to finish your novel manuscript this year, what will you do this week? If you're trying to finish a draft by February 1 (my goal), how many words or scenes do you need to write every day or week to get there?

Schedule a check-in. Put it on your calendar. Set a notification. Check in at the end of the period, yes, but check in before that, as well. Ask a friend to email you at the end of a week and ask you what you've done. Set an alarm to chime at 1 p.m. every Sunday and ask—did you write every day? Did you research those agents? What did you do towards your goals this week?

End every week with a plan for next week. You planned to work every morning from 5-7 am, but you can see an early morning orthodontist appointment that will derail you next Wednesday. Pick another time, and put it on the calendar, now.

Strategize for success When I set goals, I take the opportunity to reassess my work strategies. Because I'm a full-time writer, I work on writing-related tasks all day—but it's still easy for me to get caught up in putting out the fires in my email rather than making progress on a long-term

project like a book.

Working on my hardest piece of writing first thing in the morning—before I look at anything else—really works for me, but too often, I don't get there. Now's the time to re-commit to making that happen, and set some other strategies as well.

When I had a non-writing day job, I went to bed at nine and wrote for an hour before turning off the light (I called that my “do you want to have read a book, or do you want to have written one” strategy). Maybe that's what would work for you.

If you're getting up early in the morning to work, leave your phone on its charger until you've hit your goal. Things will inevitably happen to mess up your plans—but opening your email is the equivalent of waking up a sleeping dragon. Do you want to get anything done here, or not?

Word of the year Finally, give your writing goals an overarching theme—one word that will encompass what you want your professional life to be like this coming year. Do you want to expand? Roar? Persevere? Grow? We like the constraint created by using one word for both our personal and professional lives, but some people chose two or use a phrase.

One year, early in my career, I chose “connect” and made much more of a point of deepening and expanding my network of other writers, sharing, and helping and just connecting in every way I could, and I made a real effort to spend time with my close local friends as well, setting up walks and coffees and other opportunities almost weekly.

In 2015, my word was “decide”—as in, decide what I wanted. Decide how I wanted to spend my time. Plan my hours and days actively; respond rather than react. I still come back to “decide” when I need it, which is often. “Decide” was what allowed me to refuse to let “busy” take over my days. I loved “decide.”

In a year when I needed to focus in on both home and longer work, I chose “linger.” I needed to take my time, professionally, personally, with family, with friends, over essays and book chapters and all the work I was putting out into the world. I loved my word—but our culture doesn't love the concept, which made it hard to find my word that year.

Most of the words we use to share the meaning of taking more time with something than it might necessarily require to just get it done are negative. Dawdle, poke, loiter, delay. Fritter, dillydally, drift. Even “spend time” carries the burden of wastefulness; the puritan soul saves her time, she does not spend it. Wherefore efficiency, productivity, life hacks and effective time management strategies? What about quality time?

It took a thesaurus (and embracing the earworm that is the '90s Cranberries hit) to come up with linger. Last year, my word was worthy—because I had so many options in so many areas, from how I spend my time to what I eat, that I wanted a way to focus myself on making the best choices I could. That one I thought of early. Sometimes your word just comes to you; other times you'll need to go seeking.

This year, my word found me, and that word is magic. It's the least active word I've ever had, and maybe that's because I don't feel like I need an active word. I've got active down. I really have learned and changed from past words, and from past years of goal-setting. I know how to get things done. What I don't know is how to let things happen. I figure, inviting in magic at least suggests they'll be good things. (#ignoringtheVoldemortkind)

So, with a hat tip to Elizabeth Gilbert, magic it is, of all kinds. The creative kind. The technological kind, which I want to savor. The coincidence kind, when everything suddenly has a theme. The moment kind, when all the good things come together. And the casting a spell kind, where we give ourselves permission to wish and dream and not be quite so focused on reality and possibility and the limits of the physical world.

I'll still be remain my organized, productive self. I'll still have a list of goals, accountability points, a schedule and all of my usual tricks for sitting down and getting my work done. I will not get out my cauldron until at least October 1. But part of that work, all year, will be to invite in magic, to take some risks, to be the person I am when I'm most open to experience.

Boiling that down into one word will give me a touchstone. It's going to be my personal permission to let magic happen (and maybe even write about it).

What one word can you return to that will help you reach your goals this year?

Thanks to Gretchen Rubin for turning me on to the one-word idea years ago in her book, [Happier at Home](#). Catch her [Happier podcast](#)—one of my faves—she talks about her word of the year on "A Little Happier," the short version of the podcast, [here](#).

[worksheet]