
Essay - Friday, December 8, 2023

Why should a writer sleep well ?

People say writing is a difficult task. You need brain waves, you must find the right words, you must address your audience, etc. I say there is more than these criteria: you need to sleep well if you are trying to write !

You won't write well without prior research – just to remember one aspect of writing – but you need to sleep well and dream about the subject. The next day, new impressions appear in your brain, functioning as they have always been there for decades ! This is what I call "dreaming an idea".

When I was young, I used to dream about my math exercises. Trigonometry was always difficult, but I managed to solve exercises after reading some hypotheses and then taking a nap. Is there any scientific theory to support this idea ? The answer is yes ! After digging around on the internet, I found names of scientists like Robert Stickgold, Sara Mednick and Mathew Walker¹. Dr. Walker's book, "Why we Sleep" is a superb help to show the importance of sleep in creativity – and for health in general.

According to Dr. Walker, more than a third of adults in many developed countries fail to get the recommended seven to nine hours of nightly sleep. Routinely sleeping less than six hours a night weakens your immune system, increasing your risk of cancer.

Imagine that writer, rushing to finish an essay, writing non-stop at night, with a coffee pot in front of him. This is a wrong stereotype. I prefer to show my writer waking up after a good night's sleep and working with discipline – and a reasonable deadline – after a good breakfast. The longed-for normalcy.

¹ See WALKER, 2023

Getting too little sleep increases concentrations of a hormone that makes you feel hungry, while also suppressing a companion hormone that otherwise signals food satisfaction. Even worse, if you try to diet but don't get enough sleep, it will be futile since most of the weight you lose will come from lean body mass rather than fat. The less you sleep, the shorter your life expectancy. The CDC has declared insufficient sleep a public health epidemic. The countries where sleep has declined most dramatically over the centuries (USA, UK, Japan, South Korea and several Western European countries) are also those experiencing the greatest increase in physical illnesses and mental disorders. Scientists have even started putting pressure on doctors to start "prescribing" sleep.

Some evidence proving the importance of sleep in fixing memories appeared in an experiment in which the electrical patterns of sleeping rats repeated the same patterns demonstrated when they were learning to exit a maze while awake. What's most interesting is that the repeating patterns in sleep appeared at a speed $\frac{1}{4}$ slower than real, indicating a clue as to how dreams seem to take longer for us humans.

There are at least two types of sleep in humans: NREM sleep (stages 1 to 4) and REM sleep. In the latter, dreams occur, according to the discoveries of Aserinsky and Kleitman². Since REM comes after NREM and starts again at fixed intervals, it is important that we get a good night's sleep and not just a nighttime nap. So, what's good for an afternoon nap isn't good for the night. Sleeping well all night long, and without interruptions, is essential. If you miss the last part of your night's sleep, you could lose 60 to 90 percent of the information your brain was organizing during REM/NREM cycles. Waking up and at 10 a.m. and not going to bed until 4 a.m. can also be detrimental to memory and learning. If you go to bed too late it will also impair NREM activity, again causing memory damage.

REM sleep and the act of dreaming have another benefit: inspiring creativity and promoting problem solving. Walker cites the case of Dmitri Mendeleev, on February 17, 1869. The Russian chemist had an obsession. He believed that there was a logical order in the organization of chemical elements. Mendeleev created cards with the characteristics of each known element. For years he dealt with these cards, trying to solve this mystery of nature. He lay awake for three days and

² See FERNANDES,2023

three nights thinking about it, when he succumbed to tiredness and fell asleep. He dreamed of a table organized into rows (periods) and columns (groups). In his own words:

"I saw in a dream a table where all the elements fell into place as required. Awakening, I immediately wrote it down on a piece of paper. Only in one place did a correction later seem necessary".

But an uncomfortable question persists in my mind to this day: Did the revealing dream come as a response to a mind tortured for days with a problem? Would the answer have come anyway without Mendeleev recklessly wasting so much sleep? No one knows for sure yet.

I recently interviewed Mary P., a famous Brazilian writer. She says:

"- Writers today are subject to the rules of the publishing market. This, in turn, is regulated by sales and price, not to mention that the advances received for a work were also reduced. If genres such as romance and non-fiction were previously privileged, our societies - increasingly divided into islands of identity - are also producing books to meet niches: race, gender, etc. Whether they are creative or not, writers today need to obey the rules of the market to sell or, no matter how beautiful their texts are - and there are many - they will not be visible."

It seems like an inappropriate environment for peaceful sleep, doesn't it?

Anyway, next time you write, try to catch up on sleep, for the sake of your health. Identify sleep-related problems and correct them. You need to be as quick as possible, no matter the deadline. This way, you can allow natural processes to happen. To radically paraphrase Kant, there is no real path to creativity and memory improvement – neither in space nor in time.

References

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