

# Perfecting the art of slowness

A journalist learns to disregard the time clock to strike the right emotional note

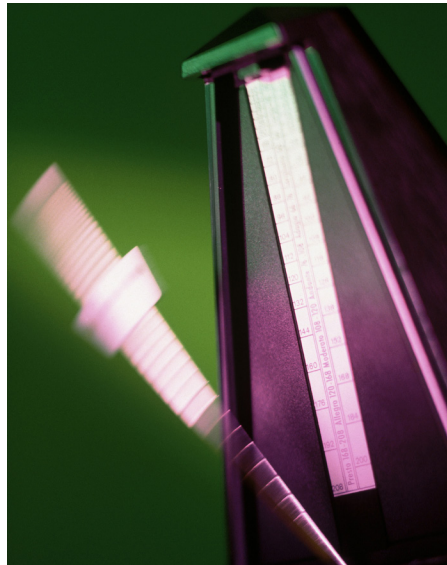
**M**y fingers flew through the notes as if I were racing to break the finish-line tape. As a young flute player, I prided myself on speed. Breezing through concertos with 16th, 32nd and, at times, even 64th notes, I made first chair every year in my tiny school's concert band and the countywide band. One year, I earned the first chair in a statewide band.

Speed equaled excellence. It nabbed me ribbons in track and trophies in basketball. It won me prizes in a statewide typing contest. By age 16, I was already pursuing journalism as a career. Writing for local dailies, I raced against the clock to get stories in on time. Me vs. deadline? I usually won.

But speed could only take me so far. After years of denial, I began to realize that it took more skill to practice the art of slowness. In 2009, I left full-time journalism in favor of juggling caring for my toddler with part-time freelancing. I began pitching essays to magazines and literary journals. Acceptances have not poured in. Maybe it's the stiff competition. I also blame my penchant for haste.

"Slow down!" That is the sign I need above my desk. It deserves a prominent place next to the framed poster of a Georgia O'Keeffe flower painting and her saying: "When you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it's your world for the moment. I want to give that world to someone else."

I have no chance of giving the world I see to a larger audience unless I force myself to slow down before hitting send. It's OK to write down thoughts as they occur and compose an essay in one sitting. But if I write a piece and call it finished in that moment, I cheat my readers and myself. If I write the piece and wait



an hour to revise it, I am still working too quickly. Two days? A week? That time frame could still be too short. Few of us can do our best writing on the first try.

**DEVELOPING THE** art of slowness in writing is not about carving large blocks of time for strolls, bike rides and yoga to relax the overworked, stressed mind of a writer. It's more complicated than that. I liken the process to the way I grew from a technically proficient flutist into a musician.

During my first five years as a flutist, I practiced at least an hour a day. My parents made me shut the door. The sound coming out of my open-holed, silver-plated flute was not beautiful music. It was noise. Even as I made first chair in bands, I failed to get into nationally competitive music camps or receive the highest rating in annual

contests. The summer before my sophomore year of high school, I went to a flute camp taught by a university professor. Before we put flute to mouth, we had to lie on the floor and breathe. Taking one gulp of air, we counted aloud as high as we could. After breathing exercises, we stood, let our bodies hang like rag dolls, and then loosened each muscle.

Next, using exercises by French flutist Marcel Moyse, we played a chromatic scale, performing a quarter note, then holding the next note for three beats. The professor pushed us to play each measure slower than I thought possible. The first time we did the exercises, I hated them. I felt like that struggling actress in the musical *A Chorus Line* who sings about how she feels nothing every time the drama teacher urges her to feel the motion of a bobsled.

The next day, I tried to listen to myself play rather than succumb to internal kvetching. Maybe the tone of my flute sounded less tinny. Something sounded different. I was not sure what. Day after day, we did these exercises before we played a note of a concerto or sonata.

At home, I closed my door and practiced with the techniques I learned at flute camp. My parents stopped asking me to shut the door, and they signed me up for lessons with the professor. Loosen up the body. Loosen up the mouth, lips and cheeks. And loosen up the mind. My flute teacher forced me to do all three. She made me shelve my concertos packed with 16th and 32nd notes and assigned me Gluck's "Menuet and Dance of the Blessed Spirits." It looked too easy and too slow.

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I complained. The teacher insisted. Play the piece as if you were telling a story, she said. I invented a story. A couple finds each other, falls in love, and then waltzes barefoot in the woods. It was a story that could not be rushed.

For weeks I worked on the same piece of music. A metronome at first gave me artificial slowness. Then, over time, my fingers stopped flying on their own. They began feeling. I performed this piece at a competition I had participated in for years, and for the first time, received the superior score. The judge in the critique wrote what no one had said to me before: My flute playing moved her. When I stopped dashing to an imaginary finish line, I discovered how to make music rather than just play it.

**FRANKLY, I WROTE** the first draft of this essay at rocket speed. When I refer to the art of slowness in writing, I am not talking about the initial word dump for an essay. My process of creating this essay began long before I started writing it.

Years ago, I read *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron and became a fan of her morning pages. Before she begins her work for the day, she writes three pages in longhand of what she dubs "strictly stream-of-consciousness." She nicknames these pages of random thoughts "brain drain." I think of those scribbles as a brain dump. I sometimes write the pages longhand, but I confess I most often type them and add them to a running word document I call "free write." I did a riff about forcing myself to be slow in a recent morning-page session.

Another day, while driving, I got an epiphany and jotted it down on a paper scrap. Grabbing tea before picking up my

son from day care, I scribbled a little more. This was my warm-up before the real thing.

But my most important act on behalf of slowness happens after I finish the first draft. Jessica Keener, a fiction reader at *AGNI* and a writer friend, recently read an essay of mine before I submitted it to another journal's contest. I culled a 20-page excerpt from my book-in-progress about how my journey through grief after the loss of my brother led me closer to my faith. I gave the essay to Jessica expecting heaps of praise and some suggestions. Instead, she gave me the best gift: honesty. The piece needed more scenes, better flow and intense massaging. I responded as if I were a reporter with a two-hour deadline: quick chops, adds. *Voilà! Back to you, Jessica.*

She took hold of the reins. "Allow yourself to feel the scene before scurrying off to explain it," Jessica wrote via email. In a later phone conversation, she urged me to slow down during revision. I gave the essay a vacation and worked on something else for several days. At a coffee shop a few days later, I began thinking of a scene that could address one of Jessica's concerns. I wrote longhand about what it was like 30 years ago to ride to high school with my brother in his green Barracuda. A few days later, I found a place for that scene in the essay. I revised at a more thoughtful pace. With Gluck, I let each note flow from my fingers. With the essay, I let each word find and settle in its place.

In May, author Ann Hood led a workshop on revision at Grub Street's annual Muse & the Marketplace conference in Boston. She gave me another lesson in the importance of slowing down.

"Rule No. 1," Hood said, "is to get rid of that time clock."

She talked about letting one piece of writing sit for a month to two months or longer while we move on to something else. As a journalist, I rarely had the luxury of time. Most days, I could let a piece sit for 10 minutes before having to revise it and send it on to my editor. Sometimes, if I was lucky, I had a few days. As a freelancer, I am in charge of my own time clock, but the hardest thing for me is to follow Hood's reminder at her workshop's conclusion: Turn off that time clock.

Another reason to perfect the art of slowness is practical, in my case. Starting in my late 20s, I developed tendinitis in both wrists. Type slower, doctors urged. Speed, for me, can equal pain. I never get writer's block. I get writer's cramp.

If I scrutinize my biggest writing successes, they come when I push for more time to write, when I purposely slow down. A decade ago, I shadowed a college freshman at a Texas university for a three-part series for *The Dallas Morning News*. My boss asked how much time I needed to write. A week, I suggested. Then I asked if I could write the piece at home, away from the newsroom, away from a place where everything revolves around time, where editors often shout, "Where's the story? Need it now!" In that week spent at my desk in my 800-square-foot apartment, I was like a young flutist discovering her tone. With no daily deadline, I experimented. I wrote for a few hours, then walked outside for a while before returning to my desk.

When the first drafts were done, I broke out of isolation. The newspaper's writing coach critiqued my effort, and I tried to do what I still must remind myself to do now: Revise with care and patience. Now the only clock ticking is the plastic one on my kitchen wall.

### Linda K. Wertheimer

Linda K. Wertheimer, a former education editor for *The Boston Globe*, teaches journalism at Boston University. Her attempt to slow her writing down recently paid off. An excerpt from her memoir won third place in *Moment's* 2010 memoir contest and an honorable mention in *Tiferet's* 2011 nonfiction contest. Follow her at [twitter.com/lindakwert](https://twitter.com/lindakwert). Web: [lindakwertheimer.com](http://lindakwertheimer.com).

## 4 takeaway tips for developing story ideas

1. Keep a journal or notebook, where you can riff on whatever comes to mind and jot down ideas wherever you are.
2. Try writing a scene longhand for a slower pace.
3. Experiment with incorporating short breaks into your writing process. After working for a few hours, take a walk and then return to your desk.
4. Give your piece a vacation and work on something else for several days or longer.