

Some irreverent thoughts on the word 'Deadline'

One of the most evocative words in the business world, and indeed in the life of a medical writer, is 'deadline'. Webster's dictionary defines it as 'a date or time before which something must be done' or specifically (the *TWS* editor will love to read this) 'the time after which copy is not accepted for a particular issue of a publication'. This sense of strict demarcation derives from the word's military origin: the *Wordsworth Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* contends that the phrase was coined during the American Civil War in the notorious Confederate prisoner of war camp, Andersonville, located at Camp Sumter in the state of Georgia. Some distance from the peripheral wire fence a line was marked out and any prisoner crossing this line was shot at sight.

Semantically, the word has kept its originally menacing character across the centuries. Deadlines don't peek, they loom. You may stroll to 'meet a deadline', according to your style of working (more on that later), but more often the deadline will have been 'set' (though not always in stone). If you have a 'tight deadline', the feeling of constriction in the throat is almost palpable. Deadline is, by its very nature, a horizontal word, because both of its compound components denote flatness. When spoken aloud, it transports a feeling of finality. If it lived on your street, it would be the neighbour with the run-down house and the pitbulls in the yard. If you met it at the store, you wouldn't talk back to a deadline. It would just scowl at you, anyway. Its favourite holiday is Hallowe'en.

Of course, these perceptions are heavily influenced by my Teutonic background. How you view a deadline depends a good deal on what culture you come from and how seriously you take the wishes and demands that others are trying to impose on you. A French 'date limite' or Spanish 'fecha limite' is a much less serious thing than a deadline. You aren't envisioning prison warders with guns when you hear the word, for one thing. Of course the Germans have happily integrated the word 'deadline' into their business speak, especially in so-called 'creative' industries like advertising. This is in spite of the fact that they have a perfectly valid term: 'Abgabetermin'. Admittedly, this translates more like 'it would be nice to have the material at this date, please' than 'hand it over, bubba'. In the United States, habitually breaking your deadline may jeopardise that most important line in American business culture, the bottom line.

Besides the cultural bias in viewing a deadline, there is also the individual difference in how people work that affects how they meet deadlines. I would class them into three broad categories: Firstly, there is the group that I will call the 'structuralists'. They are accustomed to applying salami tactics, neatly prioritising and organising their work. They breeze through the project and then casually meet the deadline, like "Oh, hi, nice to see you".



These people are not prone to overly high caffeine use or heart attacks. Then there is the group that I will call the 'pressure cookers'. They sit at their desks, letting the internal pressure build while the deadline looms ever nearer. At some indefinable point they suddenly start working and complete everything at the last minute in a frenzy of activity. Then they collapse with a feeling of exhilaration.

Some people in the creative industries maintain that deadlines spur them on to become even more creative. This may be true. However, I have a hunch that this method becomes ever harder to adhere to after the age of 35, or after you become a parent and chronically sleep-deprived (whichever comes first). Finally, there is the group I will call the 'mañanas'. They never take a deadline seriously, assuming that it can always be negotiated into a future date. They are secretly hoping that the whole project will fold, making the deadline obsolete. They do not stress easily. They can be charming and mercurial characters with an active social life, but they usually like to let other people do the work, which can be a pain if you are a co-worker.

I'll leave you to guess which group I belong to. Just a hint, though: 'The Editor Knows...'

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