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Tools for Planning a Residency

You've heard about people going on artists' residencies, and you think you'd like to shape your life to make room for one (and I mean "shape your life" – it will take active commitment to make this happen).

Ask yourself the follow questions in order to get a feel for what might fit your needs. Then, take a look at some of the resources I've compiled at the end of this tip sheet.

How long do you want to spend on a residency?

Sometimes this is the question that drives all of the others. Time is one of the constraints we humans live with, and your life, no doubt, has time constraints.

While we all dream of six months or a year of creative time, I have known people to set that time aside and get very little done because of the overwhelming amount of openness they were facing. On the other end of the spectrum, a handful of hours or one day is generally not enough to really dive into a creative mindset. It also doesn't require that much effort to make happen, and, in my opinion, making an effort to set aside time is part of how the residency experience works.

I would suggest an amount of time that feels like just a little more than you can spare. Think: an amount that requires asking your boss, your partner, your clients, or yourself permission for. For some folks, that's going to be a long weekend. For others, it may be a couple weeks or a couple months. Make sure it's not so long that it's overwhelming.

What are your goals for your residency?

Do you want to finish a book or do you want to show up with a blank journal and get inspired to start something new? Do you want to further focus the kind of writing you are already doing, or do you want to reinvent yourself and your style? Do you want to spend most of your time writing, or do you want to mix your writing time with other creative time, athletic time, or exploratory time?

These are important concrete questions, but, in answering them, don't forget the more nebulous ones as well. What do you want to feel like on your residency? What kind of a feeling do you want to come home with? Is productivity or serenity your main objective?

Where do you want to be?

Your goals and time frame will likely help to determine your residency location. The reality is that we can all write from anywhere. Amazing books have been penned in prison cells and cramped apartments. That said, it can also be nice to dream big here. When you picture yourself writing easily and fluidly, where are you? When you think about places that inspire you, what are those places like? Are they cities with art museums or are they working farms? Are they one-room cabins, tents in the wilderness, or campuses with dozens of other writers? Are you in the snow or at the beach? Can you go out to dinner, or do you have to cook all of your meals over a two-burner Coleman stove? Thinking about these place-based details will help you to make decisions. There's a residency out there for just about every environment. Choose wisely!

What kind of structure do you want?

One of the residencies I did involved accompanying bird biologists on a 7-day trip in northern Alaska. It was highly structured; I showed up when they told me to, did what they told me to, watched, took notes, and then supplied them with an essay for publication. It was the perfect way to experience a very different reality and gather experiences to write about.

The residency I just completed was much more open-ended. I was given space and time in a traditional Cretan village to work on whatever I wanted, along with creative and logistical support to keep me moving.

Are you the kind of person that needs structure to get things done? Do you have existing projects that you are itching to finish, or are you looking for new experiences to inspire you? These questions will help guide you here.

In addition, it's important to think about mundane tasks. Do you want to shop and cook or do you want someone to prepare your meals for you? Do you want your residency to come with other land or farm-based chores, or do you want fully open days?

Think too, about the social situation. Do you want to be in community with a few other artists, many other artists, or just yourself? Do you want your partner or family to be able to come along with you? Do you want to meet new people as part of your experience or be a complete hermit?

And, the money question...

It would be terrific if money weren't an issue here, but it almost always is.

There are fully subsidized residencies out there. They give you room and board and sometimes even a travel stipend to get there. These typically require a lengthy application process (including letters of recommendation). A publication history is almost always necessary to win one. That said, there's no harm in applying for them! I keep on trying, and, one of these days, maybe I'll get lucky.

In the meantime, mere mortals like me are generally looking at partially subsidized residencies. For example, my Alaska residency was funded once I got to Alaska—meaning, I ate the food the group was cooking, slept in the same tents they did, and traveled in the same boats with them. The US Fish and Wildlife Service, the sponsoring agency, also paid for my plane ticket from Fairbanks to the starting point of the trip. However, I had to buy a ticket to Fairbanks and my in-town meals. My Crete residency was also partially subsidized, in that my housing was inexpensive, my work space was free, and my host provided me with a bicycle and drove me around a lot. But I paid for my transportation to the site, all of my meals, and my inexpensive housing. Both of these residencies required applications.

There are many unsubsidized residencies out there too. Most of them do not require applications at all. You pay them, and they provide housing, work space and, in many cases, meals. If you're in the position to take advantage of one of these, you can almost certainly find the perfect spot to meet your needs.

What about the DIY residency?

Sometimes, DIY is the best option. You can call all of the shots. You choose the place, the time, the structure, and the cost. There's no application necessary. Make the time, make the plan, and go.

My only caution here is that it can be tough to distinguish the DIY residency from a vacation. I consider myself to be a highly motivated person, and still, I like some accountability. Knowing I am on a formal residency gives me that additional motivation I need to dig in. Having to answer to someone—whether that's through the requirement of a finished product or a daily check-in—is important to me.

If you're going to set up a DIY residency, create your own accountability system and stick to it.

RESOURCES

Once you've got some answers to at least a few of these questions, start looking around and see what grabs your attention.

Here's a list of places to get your started on your search:

Poets & Writers Residency List:

https://www.pw.org/tags/writers_venues_and_communities/residencies

Resartists International Database:

<https://resartis.org/>

Artist Communities Alliance

<https://artistcommunities.org/>

Erika Dreifus' List of Fee-Free Residencies

<https://www.erikadreifus.com/resources/grants-fellowships-and-awards/fee-free-writing-residencies/>