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## Get Up, Stand Up for Your Writing

by John Moir

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NEWS AND TRENDS

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In his book *How to Write: Advice and Reflections* (Morrow, 1995), Pulitzer Prize-winning author Richard Rhodes recounts how he once worked for Conrad Knickerbocker, an editor with a single, rather colorful rule for achieving writing success: "Apply your butt to a chair." While producing accomplished poetry and prose demands infinitely more of us than simply resting on our posterior, the Knickerbocker Rule does convey a fundamental truth: Everything we do begins with sitting down to write.

**“Sitting down to write—floating in a semi-quadruplegic state, breathing shallow breaths, moving only our eyes to track the cursors on our screens—can actually lead to a decline in mental acumen.”**

But do we *really* need to sit? The hundreds of hours we spend hunched over a keyboard can exact an insidious physical toll, tightening our muscles and ossifying our joints. Our shoulders slope, our necks kink, our jaws clench, our backs ache, the joints in our hips and legs lose mobility. Moreover, sitting down to write—floating in a semi-quadruplegic state, breathing shallow breaths, moving only our eyes to track the cursors on our screens—can actually lead to a decline in mental acumen.

Two years ago, I read how Ernest Hemingway wrote *A Moveable Feast* (Scribner, 1964) at a stand-up desk in his room in Cuba. I soon discovered a number of other well-known people—not just authors—who stood up to write, including Winston Churchill, Henry Clay, Thomas Jefferson, Virginia Woolf, and John Dos Passos. I decided to give it a try.

My stand-up desk is simple. A friend helped me attach a one-inch-thick piece of white shelving to a wall in my writing studio. It measures eighteen by forty-eight inches—plenty of room to hold my work. A trip to the lumber store plus an hour's effort and my new desk was ready to go. I now stand to write my first drafts in longhand, and to edit and rewrite printouts of current drafts. I stand for phone calls and I stand when I'm reading research material. All in all, I stand for about 40 percent of my writing work.

Of course, I still like to sit some of the time, so I've retained my traditional chair-desk-computer setup. I have discovered that frequent changes in position—from sitting to standing and back again—help maintain mental acuity and physical fitness. Installing the

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Do you have a special place where you sit down (or stand up) to write every day? Whether it's a traditional desk surrounded by your favorite books, a little space cleared away at the kitchen table, or a slightly more exotic locale, send us a photograph of it.

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standing and back again—help maintain mental acuity and physical fitness. Installing the stand-up desk also provided an unexpected advantage: an additional work area. I now have a handy space to spread out my rough drafts and reference notes.

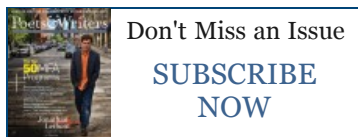
If price is no object, you can do a quick online search and order a stand-up desk to suit your needs. To meet the growing demand, many companies now offer a variety of options, from the mundane to the magnificent. Stand-up desks often have an open-frame design without drawers, although many models have hinged desktops with storage space underneath. Some stand-up desks even sport a foot rail.

An alternative is to buy an adjustable computer desk and elevate it high enough to use while standing. Another option is to store a portable lectern under your regular desk. When you want to stand, place the lectern on top of your sit-down desk and you are ready to work.

The wisdom of Conrad Knickerbocker's advice is that we need to carve out *time* to write. With a stand-up desk, we can add a corollary to the Knickerbocker Rule: To achieve writing success, apply your feet to the floor.

**John Moir** is the author of *Return of the Condor: The Race to Save Our Largest Bird From Extinction* (Lyons Press, 2006). His Web site is [returnofthecondor.com](http://returnofthecondor.com).

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