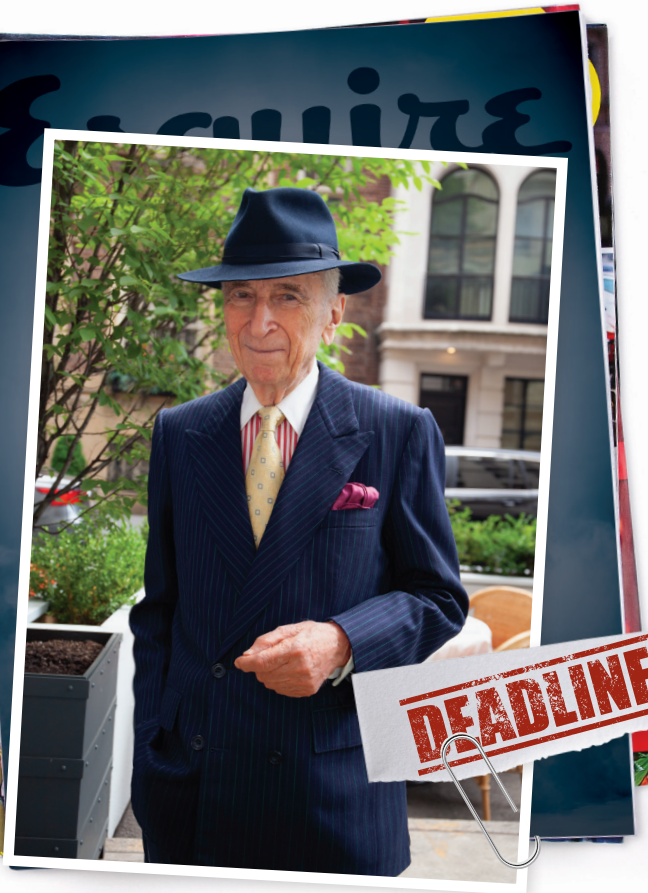


DEADLINES CAN SPUR YOUR CREATIVITY

BY DANNY HEITMAN, FORUM EDITOR



Gay Talese's 1966 *Esquire* article, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," has become a classic of literary journalism. Its special qualities grew from Talese's need to meet a deadline. Photo by Catherine Talese.

In 1965, *Esquire* magazine sent its star writer, Gay Talese, to California to interview legendary singer Frank Sinatra for a cover story. Sinatra begged off, citing a bad cold. The music star might have had other reasons to avoid Talese, including recent unpleasanties with his press coverage.

Regardless of Sinatra's motivations, his refusal to meet with Talese meant big trouble. *Esquire's* editor, Harold Hayes, was depending on a story about Sinatra, and time was running out. Eager to impress his boss, Talese didn't want to come back empty-handed. "Not for the first time did I remind myself that I was no longer the freewheeling, independent-minded young bachelor reporter I had once been, but now a married man with family obligations that demanded I make the best of my situation," Talese recalled years later.

With Sinatra unavailable, Talese ended up interviewing anyone in the singer's circle who would talk. Talese shaped his material, which also included copious observations of Sinatra from afar, into a vividly drawn profile that's memorable precisely because its center character remains elusive.

The resulting article, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," appeared in *Esquire's* April 1966 issue, and it's been widely celebrated and anthologized ever since. In 2003, *Esquire's* editors named it the greatest piece the magazine had ever published.

Talese's story about Sinatra challenges a certain school of writing that regards deadlines as the enemy of creativity. If only our muse were unfettered by the claims of the clock

or the calendar, so the theory goes, our genius would soar.

But the practical demands of staying on schedule galvanized Talese, prompting him to marshal every gift at his disposal to produce a truly memorable piece of work. Deadlines often focus many other writers, too.

Jill Lepore, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, titles her most recent collection of essays *The Deadline*. "I don't know why, but I love nothing better than a deadline," Lepore tells readers. "It's a reason to write."

With all due respect to Lepore, there are many other things I love more than deadlines. I can also think of several more high-minded reasons to write than the basic need to meet a deadline. But whatever inspires us to attempt a stretch of prose or poetry, a deadline can usefully force us to follow a project to its finish.

Whether we love deadlines or dread them, for most writers, they're simply a fact of life. Whether we're writing a report for office colleagues, a eulogy for a friend, or a novel under contract to a publisher, we have a time limit to get the work done.

As a teacher of writing, I've insisted that my students give me assignments on time or face stiff grade penalties. It's the only way to prepare them for writing beyond the classroom, where someone — a boss, an editor, a crowd poised for a wedding toast — is waiting to hear what you have to say.



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he's taught writing to university students.