Julia Alvarez was born in the Dominican Republic and came to live in Queens, New York, with her family when she was ten. Alvarez was struck by the contrast between the culture of the United States and the oral, story-telling culture of her

country of origin. In high school she developed a serious interest in writing, which for her became a way of discovering her evolving identity: "I write to find out who I am." Currently, Alvarez teaches English at Middlebury College in Vermont, where she lives with her family. She has published three novels: How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents (1991), Time of the Butterflies (1995), and ¡Yo! (1997), a series of brief narratives about the life of a writer as seen by the people in her life. She has also published a children's novel and several books of poetry. The following essay about her own writer's life and rituals is from a collection of her essays, Something to Declare (1999).

**JOURNAL**

Write about a schedule you might develop in order to give yourself the maximum amount of time to devote to the important stages of your writing process.

1. One of the questions that always comes up during question-and-answer periods after readings is about the writing life. The more sophisticated, practiced questioners usually ask me, "Can you tell us something about your process as a writer?" Younger, less self-conscious questioners tend to be more straightforward, "What do you write with! Is it a special kind of pen? What time do you start? How many hours do you spend at the computer? Do you keep a journal?"

2. I always tell my questioners the truth: listen, there are no magic solutions to the hard work of writing. There is no place to put the writing desk that will draw more words out of you. In grade school, I had a friend who claimed that an east-west alignment was the best one for writing. The writing would flow and be more in tune with the positive energies. The north-south alignment would cause blocks as well as bad dreams if your bed was also thus aligned. "Not to mention," she mentioned, "It'll be harder to reach orgasm."

3. See, I tell my questioners, Isn't this silly?

4. But even as I say so, I know I am talking out of both sides of my mouth. I admit that after getting my friend's tip, I lined up my writing desk (and my bed) in the east-west configuration. It wasn't that I thought my writing or my love life would improve, but I am so impressionable that I was afraid that I'd be thinking and worrying about my alignment instead of my line breaks. And such fretting would affect my writing adversely. (My love life was pretty tame already.) Even as recently as this very day, I walk into my study first thing in the morning, and I fill up my bowl of clear water and place it on my desk. And though no one told me to do this, I somehow feel this is the right way to start a writing day.

5. Of course, that fresh bowl of water sits on my desk on good and bad writing days. I know these little ceremonies will not change the kind of day before me any more than a funeral service will bring back the dead or a meditation retreat will keep trouble out of my life. The function of ritual is not to control this baffling universe but to render homage to it, to bow to the mystery. Similarly, my daily writing rituals are
small ways in which I contain my dread and affirm my joy and celebrate the mystery and excitement of the calling to be a writer.

6 I use the word calling in the old religious sense: a commitment to life connected to deeper, more profound forces (or so I hope) than the market place, or the academy, or the hectic blur of activity, which is what my daily life is often all about. But precisely because it is a way of life, not just a job, the writing life can be difficult to combine with other lives that require that same kind of passion and commitment—the teaching life, the family life, the parenting life, and so on. And since we writers tend to be intense people, whatever other lives we combine with our writing life, we will want to live them intensely, too. Some of us are better at this kind of juggling than others.

7 After twenty-five years of clumsy juggling—marriages, friendships, teaching, writing, community work, political work, caring for young people, one or the other suddenly crashing to the floor because I just couldn't sustain the increased intensity of trying to do them all—I think I've finally figured out what the proper balance is for me. Let me emphasize that this it not a prescription for anyone else. My friend, the novelist, critic, poet, teacher Jay Parini, can juggle six or seven lives successfully at once (write, teach, review, cook, edit, and be a good father, husband, friend), but alas, I'm of the Gerald Ford school of writers who can't chew gum and write iambic pentameter at the same time. (Spondaic chewing throws me off!) I can do two, maybe three intense lives at once: writing and being in a family; writing and teaching and being in a family; writing and teaching and doing political work; but if I try to add a fourth or fifth: writing and being in love and teaching and maintaining a tight friendship and doing political work and taking in the local waif—I fall apart; that is, the writing stops, which for me, is the same thing as saying I fall apart.

8 But still, I'm glad I haven't let such potential breakdowns stop me. I keep juggling, picking up one life and another and another, putting aside the writing from time to time. We only have one life, after all, and we have got to live to many lives with it. (Another reason why the writing life appeals so much is that you can be, at least on paper, all those selves whose lives you can't possibly live out in the one life you've got.) My advice is, if you are sorely tempted to try out a new adventure, go for it! Just don't forget where you are headed, and knowing this will imbue that adventure with even more resonance and richness. (Like going to a party with a lover you know you are going to spend the night with.)

9 Living other lives enriches our writing life. The tension between them can sometimes exhaust us, this is true—but the struggle also makes the hard-won hours at the writing desk all the more precious. And if we are committed to our writing, even if there are what seem impossibly long periods in which we have to put the writing aside in a concerted, focused way while we get our moneymaking careers started or while we raise our very young children, the way we lead our lives can make them lives-in-waiting to be writing lives.

10 What do I mean by the writing life? For me the writing life doesn't just happen when I sit at the writing desk. I mean a life lived with a centering principle, and mine is this, that I will pay close attention to this world I find myself in. "O taste and see that the Lord is good," says one of my favorite psalms. I've always trusted this psalm precisely be-
cause it does not say, "O think and meditate that the Lord is good." Instead we are encouraged to know the sacred by living our lives with all our senses fully engaged.

Another way to put it is that writing life is a life lived with all the windows and doors opened. "My heart keeps open house," was the way the poet Theodore Roethke put it in a poem. And rendering what one sees through those opened windows and doors in language is a way of bearing witness to the mystery of what it is to be alive in this world.

This is all very high-minded and inspirational, my questioner puts in, fine talk for a reading when we are sitting in a room with other aficionados of the craft. But what about when we are alone at our writing desks, feeling wretchedly anxious, wondering if there is anything in us worth putting down? How about some advice we can take home with us to carry us through the mundane and hard parts of a writing day?

Just as my friend took us through the night of losing her husband, as her telling the story helped her survive the experience and helped the rest of us by reminding us of the full journey of our lives, let me take you through the trials and tribulations of a typical writing day. It might help as you also set out onto that blank page, encounter one adventure or mishap after another and wonder—do other writers go through this?

The answer is probably yes.

Not much has happened at six-twenty or so in the morning when I enter my writing room above the garage. I like it this way. The mind is free of little household details, worries, commitments, voices, problems to solve. In fact, it's probably still rising up from the bottom of a dream. In the summer, the locust trees on the south side make me feel as if I've climbed into a tree house and pulled up the ladder after me. It helps, of course, that I have no children to wake up and feed and pack off to school or drive to day care. I also have a husband who knows how to put his own cereal in his own bowl and who, like me, enjoys having some solitary time in the early morning to read and reflect or putter in his garden before going off to work.

My mood entering the room depends on what happened with my writing the day before. If the previous day was a good one, I look forward to the new writing day. If I was stuck or uninspired, I feel apprehensive. Today might be the day when the writing life comes crashing to the floor, and I am shown up for the sham I am.

In short, I can't agree more with Hemingway's advice that a writer should always end his writing day knowing where he is headed next. It makes it easier to come back to work.

That first entry into the writing room in the early morning is just a brief visit. I fill my writing bowl and say hello to my two old cemets (stone and wooden Taino deities from the Dominican Republic) and make sure my Virgencita has fresh flowers, if it is summer, or a lit candle, in the winter. Then I head downstairs to the kitchen and my own ministration, a cup of strong Dominican coffee, which Bill and I bring back by the suitcase. Sometimes I think we plan our trips "home" according to our coffee supply in the deep freeze in the basement.

I drink my coffee in the study, reading poetry (Jane Kenyon, George Herbert, Rita Dove, Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, Rhina Espiorat, Jane Shore, Emily Dickinson...). I like to start the day with a poem or two or three or four. This is
the first music I hear, the most essential. Interestingly, I like to follow the reading of poetry with some prose, as if, having been to the heights I need to come back down to earth. (I'm reminded of Frost's wonderful lines about climbing a birch tree, "Earth's the right place for love: I don't know where it's likely to go better.")

I consider this early-morning reading time a combination of pleasure-reading time, when I read the works and authors I most love, and finger-exercise reading time, when I am tuning my own voice to the music of the English language as played by its best writers. That is why I avoid spending my early-morning reading time on magazines and fast-read books and how-to books and newspapers, all of which I enjoy, but all of which use language to provide information, titillation, help, gossip, and in many cases in our consumer culture, to sell something. That's not the chorus I want to hear. I also try never to use this reading time for reading that I must do for teaching or for professional reasons (possible blurring, book reviewing).

Finally, I use this time for reading only in English. I made a discovery one summer when I was reading poetry in Spanish in the early morning. I'd move on to my writing and find myself encountering difficulties, drawing blanks left and right as I tried to express a thought or capture an image or strike the right tone in a passage. I finally figured it out: the whole rhythm of my thinking and writing had switched to my first, native tongue. I was translating into, not writing in, English. I could hear the ropes and pulleys and levers and switches in what I was writing, as if I were unloading the words off a boat that had just come in from another language, far away.

Reading for pleasure—I love the phrase, may all my readers read me in this way!—is for me a wonderful way to prepare for doing my own writing. Not all writers feel this way. In fact, some of my writer friends confess that they can't read other writers when they are in the middle of their own novels. They feel they will lose their own voices and start to imitate someone else. But I know that I am stuck with my own voice. I can't write like Michael Ondaatje or Stephen Dixon or Annie Proulx or Toni Morrisson any more than I can have their fingerprints. That's not why I invite these writers to say a few words to me in the early morning before I set out on my own journey.

There's an old Yiddish story about a rabbi who walks out in a rich neighborhood and meets a watchman walking up and down. "For whom are you working?" the rabbi asks. The watchman tells him, and then in his turn, he asks the rabbi, "And whom are you working for, rabbi?" The words strike the rabbi like a shaft. "I am not working for anybody just yet," he barely manages to reply. Then he walks up and down beside the man for a long time and finally asks him, "Will you be my servant?" The watchman says, "I should like to, but what would be my duties?"

"To remind me," the rabbi says.

I read my favorite writers to remind me of the quality of writing I am aiming for—

*the author's husband.
Now, it's time to set out: pencil poised, I read through the hard copy that I ran off at the end of yesterday's writing day. I used to write everything out by long-hand, and when I was reasonably sure I had a final draft, I'd type it up on my old Selectric. But now, I usually write all my prose drafts right out on the computer, though, for the same reason that I read poetry for its linguistic focus first thing in the morning, I need to write out my poems in longhand, to make each word by hand.

This is also true of certain passages of prose and certainly true for times when I am stuck in a novel or story. Writing by hand relieves some of the pressure of seeing something tentative flashed before me on the screen with that authority that print gives to writing. "This is just for me," I tell myself, as I scratch out a draft in pencil. Often, these scribblings turn into little bridges, tendrils, gossamer webs, and nets that take me safely to the other side of silence. When I'm finally on my way, I head back to the computer.

But even my hard copies look like they've been written by hand. I once visited a sixth-grade class to talk to them about my writing process. The teacher had asked me to please emphasize revision, as her students were always resisting working on their writing. No problem, I said. I brought in several boxes of folders with ten or twenty drafts of certain stories. The hard copies were heavily marked with my revising pencil. The teacher told me that the day after my visit, she was going over my presentation with her class, and she asked them, "So, what does Julia write with?"

"With a pencil!" they all shouted. Obviously, what they remembered were not the hard copies but all the scribblings, jottings, arrows, crossings-out, lists in the margins.

With all those emendations, my drafts are almost unreadable. In fact, if I wait several days before transferring these revisions to my computer copy, I can't read them myself. As I revise, I begin to hear the way I want a passage to sound. About the third or fourth draft, if I'm lucky, I start to see the shape of what I am writing, the way an essay will go, a character will react, a poem unfold.

Sometimes if Bill and I go on a long car trip, I'll read him what I am working on. This is a wonderful opportunity to hear what I've written. I always end up slashing whole paragraphs and long passages. It reminds me of how my students describe having their writing workshopped as having it "torn apart." I always imagine a pack of hungry, evil-looking wild dogs when my students use this phrase. Actually, I've found that even if a listener doesn't respond in a negative way, the process of reading my work to someone else does tear apart that beauitiful coating of self-love in which my own creation comes enveloped. I start to hear what I've written as it would sound to somebody else. This is not a bad thing if we want to be writers who write not just for ourselves and a few indulgent friends.

When I'm done with proofing the hard copy of the story or chapter or poem, I take a little break. This is one of the pleasures of working at home. I can take these refreshing breathers from the intensity of the writing: go iron a shirt or clean out a drawer or wrap up my sister's birthday present. Not so good as "breathers" for me
are activities like answering the phone or making phone calls or engaging with other people in a way that is anything other than brief. Otherwise, I am lured into their lives or into musing on a problem they have presented me with or worrying over some tension between us. And there goes the writing day, down the telephone cable.

32 Admittedly, this makes it hard to have people around when I’m working, and this is where having a home writing room is not such a great idea. I finally caved in and bought one of those machines therapists use that makes white noise. (Now there are fancier models that deliver oceans and rainfalls and cocks crowing in the morning.) Even so, I’m acutely sensitive to the presence of guests and family in the house and the writing day is just not the same as when I have the house to myself. If I had to do it over, I would build a writing space apart from my living space. Of course, it would have to be big enough for an ironing board, shopping bags of wrapping supplies, a small stove for cooking, and all the bureaus I would want to organize.

33 After I’ve taken a break, I take a deep breath and turn on my computer. What I now do is transcribe all my hand-written revisions on to my computer, before I launch out into the empty space of the next section of the story or essay or the chapter in a novel. This is probably the most intense time of the writing day. I am on my way, and even with the help of the insights from yesterday’s run, which I jotted down in my journal, I don’t know exactly where it is I am going. But that’s why I’m writing, to find out.

34 On the good days, an excitement builds up as I push off into the language, and sentence seems to follow sentence. I catch myself smiling or laughing out loud or sometimes even weeping as I move through a scene or a stanza. “Poetry is a way of thinking with one’s feelings,” Elizabeth Bishop wrote in a letter to Mary Swenson, and certainly writing seems to integrate parts of me that are usually at odds. As I write, I feel unaccountably whole; I disappear! That is the irony of this self-absorbed profession: the goal finally is to vanish. “To disappear,” the young poet Nicole Cooley says in a poem in the voice of Frida Kahlo, “I paint my portrait again and again.”

35 That is why if there is a sudden interruption—a neighbor appears at the door with a petition he wants me to sign, or the UPS man pulls up and honks his horn—they are met with a baffled, startled look. “What’s wrong?” the delivery guy with clipboard wants to know. “Aren’t you Julia Alvarez?” Honestly, I could say, no, I’m not. She’ll be home after two. Why don’t you come back then if you want to talk to her?

36 In fact, my family is now used to this daily disappearance—though not without occasional resentment. Many a time, a call from one of my sisters begins, “It’s so hard to get in touch with you, because of course, I can’t call before two.” I admit that the comment makes me a little defensive. What if I had “a normal job,” what if I were a road worker, jackhammering a hole in the earth, or a surgeon doing fine embroidery stitches on someone’s heart? I wouldn’t be available at all during the workday. What grates, I think, is the idea that I am home and choosing to ignore them. My mother has joked that she better not die before two in the afternoon. I’ve learned to tease
back, "No, Mami, please feel free to die any time you want. But have them notify me after two, if you don’t mind."

Okay, okay, if I heard on the message machine that my mother was dying or that my sister was upset about not getting a certain job or that Bill just heard some sad news about the health of a friend of ours, I'd take the call. But the truth is that when I'm having a good writing day, I "disappear" into the writing. I don't come downstairs to listen to my messages. Many times, especially if the noise machine is on, I don't even hear the phone ring.

On bad days, on the other hand, I race downstairs and answer the phone with such a desperate, cheery HELLO! that callers wonder if they've dialed one of those 900 numbers where operators are standing by to render some dubious service. Afterwards, I wander out onto the deck and look longingly south towards the little spire of the Congregational church and wish another life for myself. Maybe I should join some clubs, be a community organizer, have lunch with a friend? I look again and see the peaked roofs of the handsome college on the hill. Maybe I shouldn't have given up tenure? Oh dear, what have I done with my life?

I have chosen it, that's what I've done. So I take a deep breath and go back upstairs and sit myself down and work over the passage that will not come. As Flannery O'Connor attested: "Every morning between 9 and 12, I go to my room and sit before a piece of paper. Many times, I just sit for three hours with no ideas coming to me. But I know one thing: if an idea does come between 9 and 12, I am there ready for it." The amazing thing for me is that years later, reading the story or novel or poem, I can't tell the passages that were easy to write, the ones that came forth like "greased lightening" (James Dickey's phrase), from those other passages that made me want to give up writing and take up another life. . . .

So it is the end of a good reading, the audience lingers. It's late in Salt Lake City or Portland or Iowa City. Outside the bookstore windows, the sky is dark and star-studded. It's the literary time of day you find in Hemingway's novels and in short stories like "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," when "it was late and everyone had left," and the bookstore people are already mentally pushing the movable bookshelves back in place and trying to remember who is supposed to be on tomorrow night when the next writer on tour rolls into town. Then, that last hand goes up, and someone in the back row wants to know, "So, does writing really matter?"

This once really happened to me on a book tour. I felt as if I'd just gotten hit "upside the head," an expression I like so much because it sounds like the blow was so hard, the preposition got jerked around, too. Does writing matter? I sure hope so, I wanted to say. I've "done" sixteen athes. I've published six books. I've spent most of my thinking life, which is now over thirty years, writing. Does writing really matter? It is the hardest, and the best, question I've been asked anywhere.

Let's take out the really, I said. It makes me nervous. I don't really know much of anything, which is why I write, to find things out. Does writing matter?

In my darker moods, I want to say, probably not. Has a book ever saved a person's life? Has a novel ever fed the hungry? It is, no doubt, a meaningless human activity
to while the time away before our turn comes to join the great blank page. But that is my three-o’clock-in-the-morning insomniac response, which, when I was an adolescent and then in some of my unhappy thirties, I thought was the “right” time of day when “real” answers came to me. I’m older now. I don’t expect “real” answers, and the time of day I prefer for figuring out the meaning of the universe if early morning, after a strong cup of that Dominican coffee. Before dinner with a tall glass of cold white wine is also a good time.

It matters, of course, it matters. But it matters in such a small, almost invisible way that it doesn’t seem very important. In fact, that’s why I trust it, the tiny re-arrangements and insights in our hearts that art accomplishes. It’s how I, anyhow, learned to see with vision and perplexity and honesty and continue to learn to see. How I keep the windows and doors open instead of shutting myself up inside the things I “believe” and have personally experienced. How I move out beyond the safe, small version of my life to live other lives. “Not only to be one self,” the poet Robert Desnos wrote about the power of the imagination, “but to become each one.”

Back at home, when I’m finally finished with my writing biz or I’ve put it aside in the growing pile for tomorrow, I head to town to run errands or see a friend or attend a talk at the college. As the fields and farms give way to houses and lawns, I feel as if I’m reentering the world. After having been so intensely a part of a fictional world, I love this daily chance to connect with the small town I live in, to find out how everybody else is doing. Ann at Kinney’s wants to know how it’s going. Alisa at the College Store fills me in on her dad, the writer. At the post office, the two lovely ladies obliges me by going through their stamp folders to find me a batch of Virgencitas (old Christmas stamps) or butterflies or love swans.

How’s it going? everyone asks me, as if they really want to know all about my writing day.

And this happens not because I’m a writer or, as some questioners put it, “a creative person.” I’ll bet that even those who aren’t writers, those who are concerned with making some sense of this ongoing journey would admit this: that it’s by what people have written and continue to write, our stories and creations, that we understand who we are. In a world without any books, we would not be the same kind of critter. “At the moment we are drawn into language, we are as intensely alive as we can be; we create and are created,” N. Scott Momaday, the Native American author, claims in his book The Man Made of Words. “That existence in a maze of words is our human condition.”

But one of the characters in Robert Hellenga’s The Sixteen Pleasures argues the opposite, “Books were my life. But what did I ever learn that I didn’t already know in my heart.” I admit that this also has the ring of truth for me, but the truth is, that I wouldn’t have been conscious of this truth unless I had first read it in Hellenga’s book. I don’t know what I know in my heart unless somebody—myself included—has put it into words. “Art is not the world,” Muriel Rukeyser reminds us, “but a knowing of the world. It prepares us.”

Prepares us for what? my questioner in the back row wants to know. And again I have to admit that I don’t really know what it prepares us for. For our work in the world, I suppose. Prepares us to live our lives more intentionally, ethically, richly. At
this point, a whole phalanx of people stands up to go. A hand shoots up. “You mean to say that if Hitler had read Tolstoy he would have been a better person?”

50 That is a hard one, I admit. Let’s say that it would have been worth a try. Let’s say that if little Hitler had been caught up in reading Shakespeare or Tolstoy and was moved to the extent that the best books move us, he might not have become who he became. But maybe, Tolstoy or no Tolstoy, Hitler would still have been Hitler. We live, after all, in a flawed world of flawed beings. In fact, some very fine writers who have written some lovely things are not very nice people. I won’t mention any names.

51 But I still insist that while writing or entering into the writing of another, they were better people. If for no other reason than they were not out there, causing trouble. Writing is a form of vision, and I agree with that proverb that says, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” The artist keeps that vision alive, cleared of the muck and refuse and junk and little dishonesties that always collect and begin to cloud our view of the world around us.

52 Some time ago, I had a wonderful friend, Carole, who had a way of stringing together a bunch of words that made the lights come on in my head. I’d go on and on about some problem, and Carole would toss out one of her gems. “Hey, babe,” she’d say, “put your check mark on the side of light.” Or, “You’ve got too big a soul in too small a personality.” Or, “You’ve got to stop pulling up the little shoots to see if the roots have grown.” This last was her take on my habit of second-guessing decisions.

53 Carole spoke, and suddenly I’d feel a tremendous sense of clarity. I could see myself. I could see other people. See them “in the light of love,” another Carolism. It was as if she had turned the switch yet once more on a three-way light, and the world brightened, ever so slightly, but very definitely.

54 This is the way in which I feel writing matters. It clarifies and intensifies, it deepens and connects me to others. “We are,” as Jim Harrison says in Legends of the Fall, “so largely unimaginable to one another.” But writing allows us inside those others and knits us together as a human species. And because writing matters in this way to me, it does something else. It challenges me, not just to read and have that private enjoyment of clarity, but to pass it on.

55 By now a whole phalanx of my audience has fallen asleep on the couches that the bookstore people dragged over from the alcove to give the reading a cozy feel. My questioner in the back of the room has to go home to relieve her babysitter. My readers, who for this brief evening have become real people, come forward to have their books signed and offer some new insight or ask a further question. That they care matters. That they are living fuller versions of themselves and of each one because they have read books matters. The world goes from bright to brilliant to luminous, so that for brief seconds, we see clearly everything that matters.