The Issues

Slow periods:
- Have no work at all and none on the horizon or have no work for a limited period
  - Couldn’t find anything to fill in a gap
  - Work took less time than expected
  - Expected work didn’t come in on time
- The result: Not enough money coming in, anxiety about sustainability of my freelance business, not knowing how to use the free time productively
- But sometimes: a slow period is great if it gives you a needed break or time to catch up with non-work tasks

Busy periods:
- The ideal situation: You know the days when each new project is coming in, you will get all the resources you need to finish the job on that day, and you know exactly how much time you’ll spend on the project
- The reality: Almost never happens (at least to me!)
  - Clients tell me approximately when to expect the work, but the work comes before or after then (and often with no notice of the change).
    - Even though the client gives me the work late, they still want it by the same deadline.
    - Or they adjust the deadline, but I’m busy now and fitting in the project in this new timeline is tough.
    - I can tell the client that I can’t meet the deadline, but the client might take the job away.
  - The work comes, but I don’t get everything I need to get started, squeezing the amount of time I’ve set aside for the work.
  - When the work comes, it takes longer than I expected, either because the client didn’t explain it well or because I didn’t estimate the hours accurately.
    - Figuring out how much time a job will take is hard, especially before I’ve seen all the materials. But even if I do have the materials, it’s hard to know how long the work will take until I actually do it. And most often, clients want an estimate before I’ve gotten any of the materials.
- The result:
  - Stress!
  - Interference with your private life. Sometimes, you have to skip planned social or family activities, or you can’t get errands done, or you lose sleep.
- But sometimes: a busy period is great if you thrive on being busy and having a variety of work, and it’s particularly great when you really need the money!

Other barriers to work/life balance:
• Client expectation that you’re available to respond to emails or calls any time any day
• Trouble taking a break when you can’t physically escape your workplace
• Can’t fit in a vacation because of work commitments

**Prevention**

**Slow periods:**
- My strategy: I accept just about every job that meets these criteria:
  - It offers my hourly or project rate
  - I can do a good job on the assignment
  - I think I have enough time to do it
- I never save time for jobs that have really vague timetables and descriptions but I do accept these jobs. For example, if a client tells me that they want me to write a white paper, maybe starting in August, I won’t save time to work on the document. Too often, if I save time for something that’s not a sure thing, it doesn’t come at all or it comes in at a different time, and I don’t have any work.
- I don’t accept jobs that require me to set aside a certain number of hours a week (or a month) and only pay me for the hours I work. I’ve been burned saving those hours and not getting enough work to fill them.

**Busy periods:**
- Periods when I need to work evenings and weekends (or more than 40 hours per week billable time): tough to prevent
- Before I accept a job, I get as much information as possible from the client about the assignment in advance by phone (so that I get all my questions answered to my satisfaction) about:
  - Purpose of the work
  - Audience for the document
  - Samples, if available, of similar work or work the client likes
  - What material I will get and when I will get it
  - What, exactly, the client wants me to do
  - Who I will report to and how
  - Milestones and timing of each (e.g., how many drafts, how many rounds of review and who the reviewers will be, final version)
  - How flexible the milestone timeframe is
- I tell clients in advance when I’m available (including vacation days I’m taking and days I have committed to other assignments, especially meetings) and how much time I can give to a project.
  - But I don’t always know my availability.
  - Clients aren’t always sure about the details of their jobs.
- The agreement or contract—Ideally, this lays out all of the above information.
  - But there’s a limit to how much I can customize these documents, and it’s impossible to anticipate and cover all contingencies in advance.
Managing Slow and Busy Periods

General:
- Set aside a workspace (a room in your house, a coffee shop, a coworking space), which helps you keep your work and personal lives separate
- Set a weekly schedule and stick to it
  - The schedule should include work commitments, time for managing your business (e.g., paying taxes, sending out invoices, talking to potential clients, applying for jobs), and personal time
- Tell clients when you are and aren’t available by phone or email.
- When your scheduled work period for the day ends, stop working! Ideally, leave the room and shut the door. And don’t give into the temptation to just do a bit more work.

For slow periods:
- If I think that a slow period is coming, I write a list of things to do during that period.
  - Professional tasks:
    - Checking AMWA and other sites for potential jobs.
    - Updating my resume, website, LinkedIn page, freelance directory listing, and any other places I promote my business online
    - Taking online training (such as the courses that AMWA offers)
    - Organizing my computer files and folders
    - Deleting outdated emails
    - Filling in tax forms
  - Personal tasks:
    - Cleaning closets!
    - Organizing kitchen drawers
    - Running errands
  - Relaxation or personal enrichment:
    - Visiting a museum
    - Going for walks
    - Spending more time at the gym
    - Spending extra time reading for pleasure

For busy periods:
- Say no when you need to! If you’re sure you don’t have time for a job, tell the client no. But thank them for offering you the work and tell them you’d love to work with them on a similar task in the future.
- Make sure that you really can’t manage all of the work you have by the deadlines.
  - If you use time-management software or apps (I haven’t found one I like, but they might help.
  - I use an excel spreadsheet. It has columns for estimated total hours and then each week during the busy period. Each row is one project. So for each project, I put the total number of hours I think that project will take and the number of hours I plan to spend on it each week until the deadline. This gives me a good sense of how many hours total I need to spend during this period. I prefer keeping my total weekly hours at 40, but if I know I’ll need more than that, I’ll figure out what
weekend days I can spend working without interfering with any family or social plans. Others might include evenings in these plans, but I don’t work well in the evening.
  o I often (but not always!) find that although the work feels overwhelming, it’s more manageable than it feels.
• Talk to the client about the scheduling challenge.
  o But first, have a plan. What do you want to ask the client for? What can you offer in return? Maybe you can do part of the work by the initial deadline and do the rest after that. What will you do if the client insists that you meet the deadline?
• Consider hiring someone to help you.
  o I’ve used my daughter, who works for a publishing company and is relatively cheap. I’ve helped other freelancers who were in a bind. I haven’t yet hired another freelancer to help me, but I’d like to figure out how to do that.
• I often ask the client to take care of basic tasks, like formatting the document (which I’m not very good at anyway) or organizing the references. This decreases the total time I’ll need to finish the project.
• If the client didn’t explain what you were getting and when or what you were expected to do, you have a good reason to ask for a modified deadline. If you misunderstood or underestimated the amount of work, admit that. Clients often understand these challenges and are willing to negotiate.
• If the client can’t change the deadline, ask another client who’s giving you more work than you can handle right now and see if they can give you any flexibility.
• Remember—Be grateful that you have so much work, are advancing your business, and are making money! Remind yourself of slow times when you’re worried about having enough work!

Take care of yourself!
• Always schedule breaks while you’re working
• Decide in advance how many hours you’re going to work and stick to that
• If you work too long at one stretch, your productivity declines. See this article from the Harvard Business Review https://hbr.org/2015/08/the-research-is-clear-long-hours-backfire-for-people-and-for-companies
• Promise yourself a reward (an outing, a book, something on your Amazon wish list, an edible or drinkable treat) when the busy period is over or when you finish a major project
• Schedule a vacation
  o I typically schedule 2- or 3-week vacations (not common for Americans, I know). I put them on my calendar at least 6 months in advance. I very rarely have commitments that far in advance, so I can usually schedule my vacations at a time that works. So if a client does ask in advance about my availability, I can give them a firm answer.
Sample chart for comparing project time requirements with hours I have available

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