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ARTICLE MEETINGS

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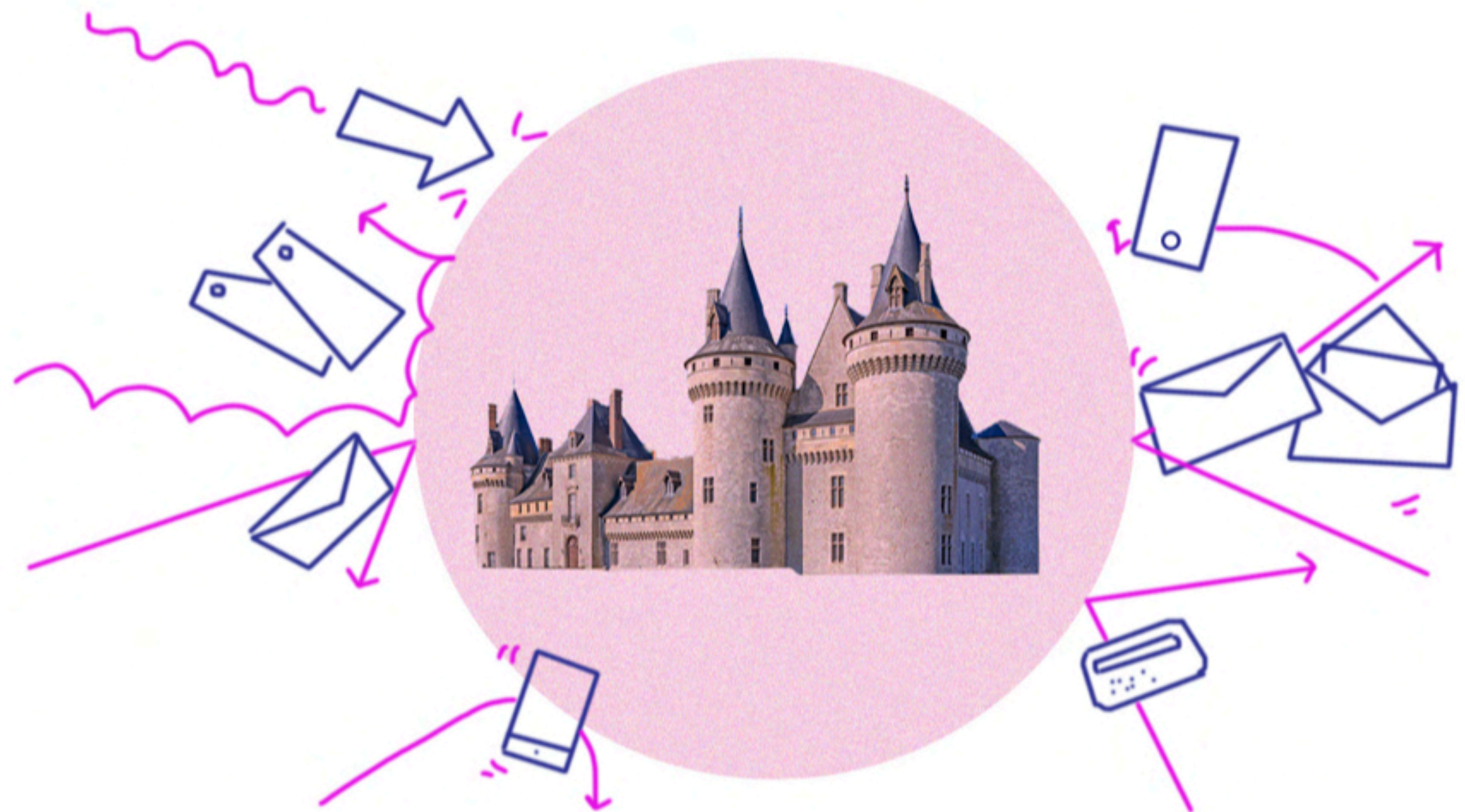
by Neil Pasricha

MEETINGS

Why You Need an Untouchable Day Every Week

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I hate meetings. They sit subconsciously in my brain, taking up space. I prepare for them in my notebooks. I travel to them, and then back again, in the middle of my work days. And what do most meetings usually result in? You guessed it — more meetings.

When I worked as Director of Leadership Development at Walmart, my days were full of meetings. Everybody's were! And when I quit two years ago to strike out on my own as an author and keynote speaker, I thought my days full of meetings were behind me.

But I was wrong.

I now have research calls and phone interviews; lunches with literary agents and web developers; conference calls about book titles and publishing schedules; and radio interviews and media prep calls. And before every speech I give, there's always a meeting with the client and meeting planner to clarify goals and logistics for the event.

Meetings never really go away.

But the problem is that I'm now measured almost solely on my creative output. And there's no time for it! It's not just me, either. As our world gets busier and our phones get beepier, the scarcest resource for all of us is becoming attention and creative output. And if you're not taking time to put something new and beautiful out into the world, then your value is diminishing fast.

I used to be one of those "wake up at 4 a.m." or "keep chugging 'til 4 a.m." guys who grinds away at work for hours while everybody else sleeps. It's how I wrote [a thousand blog posts](#) in a thousand days. But I now understand that you can only drive in the express lane for so long before the wheels come off.

I'm no longer that guy. Now when I get home after work, I soak in time with my wife and two little boys. Nothing is or will ever be as precious to me, and I resist insight from anyone who isn't making space for loved ones. I realized that what I needed was a *practical* way to get more work done without taking more time. And, to be honest, I needed it fast. Why? Because in my first year as a full-time author, I actually started feeling my productivity *slipping* — even though I had quit my full-time job. It wasn't just disheartening; it was also embarrassing. "So how's the new book coming?" "Oh, now that I quit my job? Terribly!"

I finally found a solution that I feel has saved my career, my time, and my sanity. If you're with me right now, I bet you need this solution too: I call it "Untouchable Days".

These are days when I am literally 100% unreachable in any way...by anyone.

Untouchable Days have become my secret weapon to getting back on track. They're how I complete my most creative and rewarding work. To share a rough comparison, on a day when I write between meetings, I'll produce maybe 500 words a day. On an Untouchable Day, it's not unusual for me to write 5,000 words. On these days, I'm *10 times* more productive.

How do I carve out Untouchable Days?

I look at my calendar *sixteen weeks* ahead of time, and for each week, I block out an entire day as UNTOUCHABLE. I put it in all-caps just like that, too. UNTOUCHABLE. I don't write in all-caps for anything else, but I allow UNTOUCHABLE days to just scream out to me.

Why sixteen weeks ahead? The number of weeks isn't as important as the thinking behind it. For me, that's after my speaking schedule is locked in — but, importantly, *before anything else is*. That's a magic moment in my schedule. It's the perfect time to plant the Untouchable Day flag before anything else can claim that spot.

On the actual Untouchable Day itself, I picture myself sitting in a bulletproof car surrounded by two-inches of thick impenetrable plastic on all sides. Nothing gets in. Nothing gets out. Meetings bounce off the windshield. Texts, alerts, and phone calls, too. My cell phone is in Airplane Mode all day. My laptop has Wi-Fi completely disabled. Not a single thing can bother me... and not a single thing does.

But, what about emergencies, you might be wondering?

The short answer is that there really never are any. The long answer is when my wife asked me about emergencies, she didn't love my rant about how back in the day, nobody had cell phones, and we were all unreachable at times. As a compromise, I told her that when I started scheduling Untouchable Days, I'd open the door of my bulletproof car for an hour at lunchtime. When I did, I came face to face with the whizzing bullets of seventeen text messages, dozens of urgent-sounding emails, and endless robot-generated alerts and feeds — and precisely zero emergencies from my wife. So after a few months, we stopped doing that and instead I just started telling her where I'd be. That gave her peace of mind that if something horrible happened, she could call the place I was working or simply drive over and find me as a last resort.

I've now pulled off Untouchable Days for a year. Nothing horrible has ever happened, and we've both grown more comfortable with zero contact throughout the day.

So what do Untouchable Days look like up close?

I think of them as having two components. There is the deep creative work. When you're in the zone, you're in a state of flow, and the big project you're working on is getting accomplished step by step by step. And then there are the nitros — little blasts of fuel you can use to prime your own pump if you hit a wall. These unproductive moments of frustration happen to all of us, and it's less important to avoid them than to simply have a mental toolkit you can whip out when they happen. What are my tools? Heading to the gym for a workout. Grabbing a pack of almonds. Getting up and simply running down the street, or going on a nature walk. After all, [Thoreau said](#) "I believe that there is a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright." And [Hemingway stated](#) "I would walk along the quais when I finished work or when I was trying to think something out. It was easier to think if I was walking and doing something or seeing people doing something that they understood." What else? A ten-minute meditation. Or switching to a new workspace. Or my

wonder drug of precariously turning off Airplane Mode for ten minutes (while staying off of email and text) and leaving voicemails for my parents and close friends, telling them I love them. It works every time, and I get back to work quickly because, let's be honest, nobody ever answers their phone.

So what happens if the bulletproof car really does get bumped? Say I get an incredible speaking invite or somebody much more important than me only has *this one day* to get together? Red alert: The Untouchable Day is under threat. What do I do?

I have a simple rule. Untouchable Days may never be deleted, but they can move between the bowling-lane bumpers of the weekends. They can't jump weeks, though. They are more important than anything else I am doing, so if they need to move from a Wednesday to a Thursday or a Friday, that's fine — even if I have to move four meetings to make room. The beauty of this approach is that when you plant the Untouchable Day flag on your calendar, it really does feel permanent in your mind. You start feeling the creative high you'll get from such deep output as soon as you start booking them in.

Before I started using Untouchable Days, I treaded water — I wrote articles, I gave speeches. But something was missing. When I implemented Untouchable Days in 2017, magic happened. I wrote a new 50,000 word memoir, wrote and launched a new 60-minute keynote speech, drafted book proposals for my next three books, and completely planned and began recording my new podcast — all while traveling and giving more speeches than I ever had before.

With a year of Untouchable Days under my belt, do I *still* go through the exercise of scheduling one Untouchable Day every single week?

The honest answer is no.

Now I schedule two.

Neil Pasricha thinks and writes about failure, resilience, happiness, trust, and gratitude. He is *The New York Times* bestselling author of six books, including [The Happiness Equation](#) and [The Book of Awesome](#), which have sold more than a million copies and have spent more than 200 weeks on bestseller lists. He hosts the award-winning Top 100 iTunes podcast [3 Books with Neil Pasricha](#), where he's on a fifteen-year long quest to uncover the 1,000 most formative books in the world. He gives more than 50 keynote speeches a year at places such as [TED](#), [SXSW](#), and [Google](#). Visit him online and get his book recommendations at [Neil.blog](#).
