Anti-Schedules for the freelancer who hates scheduling

Let's see if this sounds familiar: You find yourself procrastinating on the web until you're frantic to meet deadlines. Then you spend hours, days or even weeks researching time management. Following the most popular advice, you carefully track your time for a week and create a strict schedule in half hour blocks.

A month later you're not frantic, but the routine is starting to give you a headache. You feel like your creativity is being stifled. Or worse, you haven't followed it at all and you're spending more time guilt-tripping yourself than working.

I created what I call the anti-schedule to get around these issues with common time management techniques.
The anti-schedule creates working hours and recreational hours, forcing flighty writers to put butt in chair and workaholics to take breaks. It uses to-do lists to organize the day's tasks and make sure they're finished without strictly regimenting the day's hours.

You can build your own anti-schedule by following these steps:

1. Set aside work hours.
Determine how many hours you need to work per day to meet deadlines, pay bills and expand your business. Then figure out what times of day you're most productive, and make sure those are incorporated into your working hours. As writers, we still need to be available to clients and editors during the day, so if you work best at night, try compromising by doing some work during the day and your more difficult tasks at night.

2. Set aside recreational hours.
For writers, overworking is a serious danger, and it's easy to isolate yourself when working on freelance projects. To keep balance, set aside a break in the middle of your workday and a couple hours after each work day. Setting aside recreation time helps prevent burnout and makes room for inevitable unexpected social calls. Each month, set aside time for any events you'd particularly like to go to.

3. Create monthly goals and divide them into weekly, then daily to-do lists.
Establish what you want to accomplish each month—a certain number of queries, articles you've already been assigned, whatever's most important to your career at this point—and then create to-do lists to establish how you're going to get there, one step at a time. Break the month up into weekly to-do lists first, then the week's list into daily to-do lists.

Don't create to-do lists for every day this month right away. Every night before you go to bed, create a to-do list for the next day. This allows you to incorporate new assignments or unfinished work from the day before. Once a week, revise your goals for the next week to ensure that you're still on the right track.

Optional:

For a little more structure, you can divide your daily to-do lists into morning and afternoon categories, so you have a general idea of which order you'd like to complete tasks in.

Anti-schedules give the right amount of flexibility to encourage creativity and spontaneity without finding yourself frantically finishing articles the day they're due—or worse, missing deadlines. Life can always get in the way: computers break, emergencies come up, we get sick. Anti-schedules encourage constant revision of goals, erasing guilt for missing a day at work.

If you've tried every other trick in the book, the anti-schedule might be just what you're looking for.