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**A-HED**

# The Cafe That Helps Beat Writer's Block—by Fining You \$22

Customers who fail to meet their deadline pay a fee; 'I sit down and immediately start typing'

By *Suryatapa Bhattacharya* [Follow](#)

June 12, 2022 9:31 am ET

**TOKYO**—At the Manuscript Writing Cafe, people on a deadline pay to put themselves under the gaze of a manager in hopes of curing writer's block.



Joe Sasanuma, a lawyer at a technology company, is under orders from his publisher to complete a legal book by the end of the year. Alas, the words to explain the contractual obligations of cloud-computing providers haven't flowed effortlessly. So Mr. Sasanuma has been visiting the cafe.

The cafe's co-owner, Takuya Kawai, directs his customers to set a goal for the day and, if requested, prods them to get on with it. If they fail to meet it by the time they leave, they have to pay a fine equivalent to \$22. It's an honor system, says Mr. Kawai, but it seems to work.

"Looking at each other, they find themselves under the same amount of stress—and so, together, they end up working hard," he said.

Students working on book reports, comic-book illustrators, authors and corporate warriors with a presentation due have been flocking to the cafe, which opened in April in an artsy Tokyo neighborhood.

Mr. Sasanuma started co-writing his book last year while cooped up in his apartment. He was fretting about his lack of progress to his chess partner, who suggested the cafe. It seats 10, and costs around \$2 an hour, or \$4.50 an hour for a premium seat facing a brick wall.



Mr. Sasanuma arrived one day in early May and signed up for a four-hour session, telling Mr. Kawai that his goal was to write three pages. On his first try, the lawyer-author walked away triumphant. He has returned several times since, writing up to four pages each time.

“Maybe it’s the atmosphere, maybe because I’m paying, but I sit down and immediately start typing,” Mr. Sasanuma said.

Deadlines are universal, but this particular way of trying to meet them taps into some parts of Japan’s exam and writing culture. Preparation for the nation’s all-important school entrance exams begins as soon as elementary school for some students trying to get into a well-regarded junior high. These exams stress memorization of facts, and procrastinating students sometimes need the help of a hovering parent or cram-school teacher to buckle down.

Some go to study rooms at public libraries, where the enforced quiet and implicit peer pressure of others dedicated to their studies create the right mood.

Kyoko Ohtagaki, who has used the Manuscript Writing Cafe to work on a manual about digital terminology for government officials, said Mr. Kawai’s technique reminded her of childhood. “It’s comfortable. It feels like home, where you can have the help of someone lightly supervising your homework,” she said.

A professor at Taisho University assigned his students to study the Manuscript Writing Cafe to understand what it means to be under the gun. Watching customers, student Suzuno Saito said she realized that even after her school exams are over, “we will always have pressure, even when we’re adults.”



Some of Japan's most famous writers have found they work best at a place where the bills pile up the longer they linger. They retreat to a ryokan, or Japanese-style inn, and lean on the staff's help.

Novelist Yasunari Kawabata, who died in 1972, won a Nobel Prize for literature with his ryokan-assisted works. Yae Taguchi, a room attendant at an inn in Kyoto where Mr. Kawabata liked to stay, wrote in a memoir that she would try to create just the right conditions for the master's all-night writing sessions. She would prepare charcoal for the heater to last through the morning and a thermos of hot water along with a pot filled with tea leaves.

In Mr. Kawai's 2022 version of these services, he offers his customers three levels of supervision. In the first one, which would have been familiar to Mr. Kawabata, he simply leaves the writers alone with their coffee or tea. Under medium intervention, he approaches customers every hour and, to avoid startling them, speaks in a whisper and offers a choice from a plate of snacks, such as individually wrapped candy, rice crackers and Oreos.

The hard level is akin to being seated in an examination hall under a proctor's vigilance, according to Mr. Kawai. "It's like taking a test. I stand behind them and observe," he says.

Ms. Ohtagaki, who hosts a YouTube show interviewing people in digital technology, said she considered going to an inn for her writing but preferred to stay in the city during the pandemic. She said she liked the Manuscript Writing Cafe compared with co-working spaces because there are fewer people, there's no music and, with a highway intersection nearby, "people just write with the white noise from the street."

作業目標・Work Goal

→ finish watching the workshop.  
 → complete introduction of paper. by today. 400 words.  
 → ~~finish~~ 。

「3時間で3000文字の原稿を書く！」  
 など執筆時間と具体的な数字を入れた目標をご記入ください

進捗チェック：マイルド・ノーマル・ハード

以下の項目は店員が記入します

Date 2022-5-1 予定：1 2 3 (4) 5 6

Start 14:15 Usagetime

The cafe's three owners, including Mr. Kawai, don't expect to make money from hosting writers. The space is also used for a more profitable business producing videos for YouTube and other websites. However, they do see potential in franchising the idea, and they are planning a second writing studio in the Tokyo financial district, envisioning use by groups of bankers working on a presentation or report.

Mr. Kawai has some competition.

A ryokan at the hot-springs town of Yugawara south of Tokyo offers a package plan for writers starting at about \$130 a night with three simple meals. At check-in, guests sign up for prodding and specify how they would like to be reminded that time's a-ticking. Another plan is designed for readers who want to catch up on their stack of unread books.

Hideki Sato, a manager at the ryokan said his customers are mostly women in their 20s and 30s pursuing professional or creative projects.

Meanwhile, a Tokyo event-planning company has tied up with some ryokans for a travel service aimed at literary lions, or those who would like to role-play as such. Imitating the conditions publishers have imposed on some real-life procrastinating artists, the inns restrict customers to their rooms and the staff calls to check on their progress. Company founder Tomoko Kaizu said there have been more than 300 customers, and the business helped fill empty rooms during the pandemic.

Mr. Sasanuma, the lawyer-author, was feeling the heat on his latest visit to the Manuscript Writing Cafe as he started a particularly thorny chapter. He hoped to write two pages and, with a half-hour left in his allotted time, was racing to get there.



“I can tell myself at least I achieved something today,” he said.



—Miho Inada contributed to this article.

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Appeared in the June 13, 2022, print edition as 'A Cafe That Helps Fight Writer's Block'.