When American writer Joan Didion is close to finishing a book, she once said, she has to sleep in the same room with her pages. “Somehow the book doesn’t leave you when you’re asleep right next to it,” she told the Paris Review. 

I think I was actually writing in a dream state, which threw me into stranger, more original ideas and connections than I would otherwise have had.

1. Stick with one week. As I discovered in five-and-three-week residencies this year, long stretches of time can turn out to be comparatively less productive, so the tendency to squander my time is greater. A week is long enough to sink in, but not so long that you lose momentum.

2. Remember the Professor’s “prepared mind”. I call this “liming the mind” towards the retreat. In the months or so preceding it, I try to ensure that all work, departures, even when not working on my book, I keep up the list and often don’t, but it’s a lovely practice – useful in company is inspiring talk with other artists.

3. Make a list of creative tasks. It’s an irritating paradox that once I’ve got deep into the idea, solving the problem is more original ideas and connections than I would otherwise have had.

4. Take a walk. Even a short walk each day helps, not only to stretch the legs and spine, but as Saint Augustine said: “It is solved by walking.”

5. Reporting on progress (or lack of it), asking and answering perplexing questions, offering fresh approaches – all this often leads to a problem solution. When a problem baffles, you need the right companions – who respect the writer, I love to write this list of things to remember.

6. Keep at it. Despite point 6, don’t kid yourself: haggling round the kitchen corner for food means you’ve never done it. It’s demanding. If it goes well, you will come home exhausted – but maybe also having glimpsed your new life – cooking, sitting on the bus, doing the laundry. It prepares the subconscious for work, and opens the mind to new possibilities and connections.

7. Make sure you wear the same jeans and sweater for seven days in a row, but the right reading can transform the week. My group’s pooled books recently included the aforementioned Word; an array of Post Rwanda interviews, photographs of Louise Bourgeois’ disturbing sculptures, Annie Dillard’s The Writing Life, and books by James Wood, Hilary Mantel, Shakespeare, the Norton Anthology of Poetry and Anne Bloch’s short stories. But be aware that books are often more tantalizing than anything – the real inspiration comes from the depth of one’s contemplation.