

Becoming a productive academic writer.

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Academic success is greatly dependent on high quality, high quantity writing. The *quality* of your writing depends on having good and important ideas, properly designing, carrying and analyzing studies (for data based work), learning to write clearly and concisely, and getting your work published in high quality places. This article is *not* about these issues.

Rather, it tackles the issue of the *quantity* of writing. Too many times, faculty members do high quality work that never sees the light of day. They get all the way through the data analysis stage for data based work, or the literature review and thinking stage for reviews and chapters, but the final manuscript is never produced.

The common name for this problem is “writer’s block.” Having writer’s block is a cause of anxiety and depression at best, and is career threatening at worst. Fortunately, there are effective methods to fix this problem. Here are a few of them.

Write to think.

A common cause of writer’s block is the feeling that nothing can be written until the ideas are perfected. This is utter nonsense – the exact opposite is the case. Most experts in the “how” of writing agree that you don’t really know exactly what you think until you write down your first thoughts, look them over, revise, and revise again.

Conceptually, you must separate the act of generating ideas (and words) from the act of editing¹⁻³. This business of just writing down all your ideas about a project, in no particular order will seem “messy” and non linear, and may seem out of place in the world of science where linearly and logic are idealized. But for writing it is the best way to start.

Here is a formula you can use to get this first part, the generational process started. Most medical and scientific writing has as its purpose trying to answer a question. To get started on your piece, write down all your ideas about what the problem is, what you think about the answer, and why you think it. For example, the question might be “what is the best way to manage herpes simplex infection during labor.” You may think, as you start, that the best approach is to always perform a cesarean section, and you think this based on a review of the literature (if you are writing a review article), or the results of the randomized trial you just completed (for a data driven paper), or based on your experience (for an editorial). Once you have written down all the ideas you can come up with for these three components (the question, the answer, and the evidence), you can take all the copy, put it in the right order, check for logic, completeness and consistency; and finally for grammar and style.

Establish a comfortable, well-lit place to do most of your writing.

Experienced, productive academics know that time on a plane is more productive than time in the office. Sadly, it would be a prohibitively expensive proposition to fly several times a week, just for the purpose getting more writing done. (Although you can talk to your chairperson...)

Instead, my recommendation is that you try to simulate the conditions found on an airplane trip:

- Minimize distractions (forward phone to voice mail or a secretary, and shut the door)
- All the tools you need at hand
- Physically comfortable chair and writing surface
- Refreshments!

You should consider the merits of doing most of your writing somewhere other than your office. With a tablet or a laptop, you can really go anywhere. To make this a real commitment (and to fool others) put an appointment on your calendar for a meeting with “Dr. M.S.” (myself...) and leave at the appointed time.

Engage in *regular brief* writing sessions; the corollary, avoid “binge writing.”

“Regular” means at least 4 to five times per week, up to daily – the same schedule as for aerobic exercise! The criterion for “brief” depends on the role of writing in your career, and what else you need to do every day. For most academic faculty members, who have work in the clinic, lab, and classroom, 30 to 90 minutes per day is about right. (In contrast, if you make your living as a novelist, you had better spend at least 4 hours a day).

Most people are incredulous when hearing about this approach because of the widely held belief that in order to write productively one must have long blocks of uninterrupted time, and, the seeming unassailability of the idea that writing should be of the highest priority.

What is the evidence for this approach?

Robert Boice, an academic psychologist who specialized in faculty development, was particularly interested in the issue of faculty writing productivity .⁴ He observed that while faculty members understood that publishing was a critical element of the promotion decision, most spend almost no time at all writing in the first three years of their appointment. He determined to study this problem, and to find a method of “treatment.”

He began his work by interviewing a large number of professional writers. He learned that the near universal habit among this group was to establish the habit of writing for a set period of time each day, and, to avoid exceeding that length of time when possible.

Based on that “expert” evidence, Boice conducted a series of small intervention studies, in which faculty members with writing blocks were assigned to an experimental program, which involved writing to meet a goal of 3 pages per day, five days a week, or to follow their usual writing approach⁵. The result of each of the trials was the same. Almost every person, when in the experimental condition, produced the expected amount of writing, and in the control condition, they did not.

Boice also conducted a prospective observational study among new tenure track faculty members at his university, by assessing their writing style, attitudes, and output for the first year of their appointment⁶. The participants who used a “binge writing” approach -- that is, waiting for long blocks of time before trying to write -- were usually *not* productive. Faculty members who used this approach also usually rated writing as a “high priority” task. In spite of this view; this group was unproductive based on

prospective monitoring for one year. In contrast, the small group of faculty members who spontaneously used the regular brief session approach was highly productive during the year, and, this group generally rated writing as a “moderate priority.”

In response to the criticism that the writing produced during short “forced” writing sessions would be devoid of creativity and good ideas; he designed a study to test whether that was true. In this study he found that in fact, the treatment group produced twice as many ideas per session as the spontaneous group.

This approach is also advocated by Bolker², and Fiore⁷, in their books aimed at graduate students trying to write a dissertation – I recommend each of these as practical references that are useful for all writers.

Here are some “tricks” to help you integrate writing into a busy academic day:

- Start with 15 minutes a day, then increase in 15 minutes increments up as you become more comfortable.
- Write for 15 - 30 minutes first thing in the morning, before doing anything else at work. Then, you have been successful no matter what else happens.
- Carry paper and with you at all times, so that you can take advantage of spare moments

Do not exceed 2 hours per session (except in the case of an emergency deadline).

Boice observed in several settings that when faculty members greatly exceeded their daily planned time, they tended to “rest,” i.e. avoid writing somewhat in proportion to the overage. Sometimes longer is unavoidable, but usually it is not. Also, some people tolerate longer sessions; if your limit is 4 hours, go for it. But, pay attention to be sure you can really sustain that amount of daily writing regularly.

Monitor your output.

Monitoring provides a visual record of your success, and that helps to motivate continued performance⁸. It’s the same principle used by parents and grade school teachers everywhere – giving a child a star on a chart posted on the refrigerator for every day she makes her bed improves the odds the behavior will recur.

Here’s how to do it:

- Decide on a daily goal, either in time or page output. Be conservative. It is better to start with, for example, either a 30-minute, or a 2 pages, goal to begin.
- Record the daily result in a format you like.
- Post the results in your workspace.
- Monitoring can be made even more effective by showing your record to a colleague or coach on a regular basis.

Make writing a moderate, not a high priority.

This final advice sounds counter-intuitive, but recall the evidence from Boice's observational study. It seems that when we make any activity a "high" priority, the odds that we will actually do it decrease. The most obvious examples are resolutions to lose weight, begin an exercise program, or pay off credit card debt – each an outcome that is highly desirable, but which is rarely achieved.

Here is the dynamic set in motion when we make writing a high priority: we go on to imagine that it must be done perfectly, and this is quickly followed by the need to have a long period of uninterrupted time in which to do the writing. This is a set up for failure, since the big block of time rarely materializes. In contrast, if writing is not so important, then it need not be done so perfectly, and throwing down some words quickly for half an hour a day seems reasonable.

Boice suggests saying to yourself: "[I will treat writing] as the nuisance it often is ... as something that should be done, albeit grudgingly, in brief session amidst more important daily tasks."⁴

Summary

I am imagining a reader saying to herself at this point, "I bet she doesn't do all these things all the time..." He would be correct, and, a realist rather than a cynic. No method of organization or technique for using your time will create perfect world. The goal is to do your best, and know how to get back on track quickly when you fall off. Try just one of these approaches, and see if it helps you approach writing more calmly, and more regularly.

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3. Howard VA, Barton JH. *Thinking on Paper*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc; 1986.
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