


Second Edition

How to Write a Lot

*A Practical Guide
to Productive
Academic Writing*

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Preface

Hello, there. I assume that you're reading this book because you're feeling vexed by writing. It's too slow. There's no time for it. Evenings, weekends, holidays, and family time have become "writing time." You write less often than you'd like but ruminate about it more often than you should. Something has to change.

Helping people change, fortunately, is what we do in the meddling field of psychology, my intellectual home. If you look at models of change—whether it is quitting alcohol, taking up exercising, or learning to slowly back away from the open box of apple fritters—you see two approaches. One aims to change you as a person—your values, lifestyle, worldview, identity, authentic voice, and inner past—so that the desired change flows naturally from the new, improved self. The "new you," the theory goes, won't even want the fritters. The other approach, in contrast, ignores that stuff and focuses on changing what you *do*. Cultivating the inner nurturing voice of your authentic healthy self can't hurt, but I think it is faster and more practical to

say, "Let's talk about the behavior of picking up apple fritters with your hands and smearing them over your face and chest."

This book sees productive writing as a skill people learn. To write more, you needn't adopt a new writing identity, cultivate an authentic scholarly voice, or interrogate your intellectual values. You're welcome to, if that's your scene, but focusing on specific behaviors that you can do today is faster and more practical. The aim is to make writing routine and mundane, so we'll focus on strategies for writing during the normal work week, writing with less stress and guilt, and writing more efficiently. If you have a deep backlog of projects or worry about finding time to write, this book will help. It won't make writing feel like a wondrous pageant of ceaseless joys, but it will help you get more writing done during the week so that you can have a life outside of work.

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Over a decade ago, when I wrote the first edition of *How to Write a Lot*, writing was both fun and vexing. Much has changed since then. My wife and I now have two wonderful children. Lia, our Bernese mountain dog and the unofficial mascot of the first edition, has gone to that big bark park in the sky, and household snuffling duties have been taken up by Athena, our affable and fuzzy shelter mutt. And in a jarring twist of fate that has caused me to question everything I thought I knew about myself, we got a cat. But writing is still both fun and vexing—much like cat ownership, I suppose.

People I work with are occasionally asked, "So, does he really do all that stuff? You know, writing schedules and all those things from the book?" It's okay to ask. I still write every weekday with a slow-and-steady writing schedule; I don't write in the evenings, on weekends, or during long stretches of the summer; I keep track of my writing; and I meet with the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Agraphia group, which has held weekly meetings to talk about writing goals for almost 15 years.

This new edition has the same thesis and themes, but I've expanded some sections. Just in case the second edition wasn't as dispiriting as the first, there's a new chapter (Chapter 8) about writing grant and fellowship proposals. And I revised the text throughout to include all of academia. I never expected readers outside of psychology to hear about the book, but desperation about writing is broader than I thought. A few parts of this edition focus on the social sciences (particularly Chapter 6, which is about writing journal articles) but, otherwise, the book now hopes to speak to a broader scholarly audience. If I've learned anything since the first edition, it's that we all share the same writing struggles.

I'm lucky to have colleagues who like to talk about writing and who tolerate interruptions. For the first edition, many people commented on early drafts and provided encouragement for what must have sounded like a weird project. Big thanks go out to Wesley Allan, Janet Boseovski, Peter Delaney, John Dunlosky, Mike

Kane, Tom Kwapil, Scott Lawrence, Mark Leary, Cheryl Logan, Stuart Marcovitch, Lili Sahakyan, Mike Serra, Rick Shull, my dad Raymond Silvia, Jackie White, Beate Winterstein, Ed Wisniewski, and Larry Wrightsman. Lansing Hays and Linda Malnasi McCarter at APA Books deserve thanks for having faith in a quirky book. Linda deserves extra thanks for a decade of texts and calls and emojis. She knows how to put her finger on the worst jokes and the best Ethiopian restaurants.

For this second edition, it's hard to know where to start. So many people have talked with me about writing, shared their tips and woes, and pushed me to sharpen my ideas. I'm fortunate to work at a university with a vibrant intellectual community, and I'm indebted to my friends in other departments for all they have taught me about the many cultures of academic writing. They might be surprised at how much I picked up from them, but they should know by now that we nosy psychologists are always listening. Special thanks go to the writing group members, Anna Craft, Sarah Dorsey, Alyssa Gabbay, Greg Grieve, Brooke Kreitinger, Patrick Lee Lucas, Joanne Murphy, Anne Parsons, Clifford Smyth, and Pauli Tashima. May your footnotes always be at least as interesting as your text. My recent doctoral students—Roger Beaty, Alex Christensen, Katherine Cotter, and Emily Nusbaum—gave feedback on early drafts of these chapters and served as long-suffering subjects in my ongoing experiments in how to teach writing.

Because of the vagaries of summer travel and children's activities, a large chunk of the second edition was

written in small-town public libraries. Working on this book next to a shelf labeled "Large Print HORROR" was both apt and inspiring. My thanks to the librarians, patient keepers of the books.

The only thing that a writer's room needs, according to Stephen King (2000), is "a door which you are willing to shut" (p. 155). This book is for Beate, Helena, and Jonas, for coating the door with stickers, hand prints, and drawings of cats.

Second Edition

How
to
Write
a Lot

1

Introduction

How to Write a Lot is about learning how to write up the ideas you're passionate about while still having a life. It isn't about cranking out fluff, dicing big projects into least-publishable-units, or carving notches into your publication bedpost. Most academics would like to write more than they do now, but they'd rather do it in a low-drama way that doesn't cannibalize their weekends, spring breaks, and family time. This book is for them.

I take a practical, behavior-oriented approach to writing. We won't talk about your feelings, pry into your insecurities, consider your writerly identities or philosophies, or problematize your discourse. We won't talk about developing new skills either—you already have the skills needed to write productively, although you'll improve with practice. And we won't talk about unleashing your inner anything: put your "inner writer" back on its leash and give it a chew toy.

Instead, we'll talk about your outer writer. Writing productively is about actions that you aren't doing but could easily do: making a writing schedule, setting clear goals, keeping track of your work, rewarding yourself, and building good habits. Productive writers don't have special gifts or special traits—they just write more regularly and use their writing time more efficiently. Changing your behavior won't necessarily make writing fun, but it will make it faster and less oppressive.

WRITING IS HARD

Research is good, clean, nerdy fun. Whether your research involves scanning brains, crunching numbers, translating letters, or visiting archives that just happen to be located in glamorous European cities, you're having fun. But writing about research isn't fun; writing is frustrating, complicated, and un-fun. "If you find that writing is hard," wrote William Zinsser (2006), "it's because it is hard" (p. 9). How the mind composes text is an eerie and awe-inspiring mystery. We don't know how the brain transforms a squishy mass of images and feelings and symbols and memories into sentences, but we know that it hurts if you do it too often.

Because thinking of ideas is easier and faster than writing about those ideas, most professors have writing backlogs. Passive-aggressive grad students can always score a hit by innocently asking their advisers, "have any interesting projects you haven't gotten around to

writing up yet?" The typical writing backlog will range in size from *startling* to *depressing* to *monstrous*. Academics intend to publish those projects "someday," but "some decade" is more realistic. Because they struggle with writing, professors yearn for 3-day weekends, spring breaks, vacations, and the summer months. But on the Tuesday after a 3-day weekend, people groan and grumble about how little they wrote. In a big department, the first week after summer break is a din of lamentation and self-reproach. This sad cycle of yearning and mourning begins anew as people search for the next big block of time. And people usually find these big blocks on the weekends, evenings, and vacations. Writing thus usurps time that should be spent on important activities, like spending time with friends and family, making lentil soup, or knitting the dog a Santa hat.

And as luck would have it, the standards for writing are higher than ever. Our bosses, who hire and promote us, expect more publications than before. All institutions, from grant-addicted research universities to small liberal arts colleges, want to raise their scholarly profiles. More scholars are sending more papers to more journals. More scientists are submitting more grant proposals that compete for a shrinking pile of money. More first-book writers are sending proposals to a smaller group of publishers willing to publish first books. And more scholars have been hired into precarious non-tenure-track positions that, by swamping them with teaching and anxiety over what the future

holds, make writing even harder. It's a tough time to start a career in academics.

THE WAY WE LEARN NOW

Writing is a skill, not a gift. No one is born a great writer, let alone a great academic writer. No kindergarten teacher has ever remarked, "I liked your child's essay, but if I'm honest, I liked her footnotes even better." It takes humans an incredibly long time to learn to write as badly as most of us do. In graduate education, though, we spend little time training people in the craft of academic writing, compared with other professional skills. Teaching is hard and important, so graduate students take courses in teaching, apprentice as teaching assistants, and eventually step into teaching their own courses. Research methods are hard, so grad students study it in the classroom as well as in the field, the laboratory, or the glamorous European archive.

But writing—we don't usually have grad classes for that. In the humanities, you often need to publish a book to get tenure, so you would think that one of the many tenured, book-writing professors in grad school would have offered a class on how to do this—perhaps called "How to Do the One Thing That Determines Whether You Get Fired." In the sciences, you often need to juggle a lot of projects, typically grant proposals and a heap of short articles. But grant and article writing are rarely taught in our classes, so most of us would have benefited from a class called "How to Spend Years

Writing Unfunded Grant Proposals Without Sinking Into a Morass of Despair."

In short, few departments offer the same formal training for writing that they do for teaching and research methods. Instead, we teach grad students how to write via an apprentice approach. This sounds good in theory—one envisions impressionable young scholars soaking up the hard-earned wisdom of their elders—but in practice, it looks like a frazzled professor saying, "Oh, that deadline isn't firm; no one turns in their chapters on time." If we professors judged ourselves with cold, sober honesty, would we conclude that we're good role models? Do we complain about not finding time to write? Do we binge write when deadlines loom? Do we meet those deadlines? When our grad students want feedback on their writing, is our turn-around measured in days, weeks, or harvest seasons?

So this is how the bad habits get passed from generation to generation, as each wave of students gets poor training in writing and then models those bad habits for the next wave. And as academia's training languishes, its expectations for grants, books, and articles ratchet up.

THIS BOOK'S APPROACH

Academic writing can become a sordid drama. We feel oppressed by half-done manuscripts, complain about cruel rejections from journals, scramble to submit grant

proposals the day before the deadlines, fantasize about the halcyon summer days of writing, and curse the foul start of the semester for stunting our productivity. Academic life is dramatic enough already—we don't need this kind of drama. All these practices are bad. Academic writing should be more routine, boring, and mundane. *How to Write a Lot* views writing as a set of concrete behaviors, such as (a) scheduling time to write; (b) sitting on a chair, bench, stool, ottoman, toilet, or patch of grass during the scheduled time; and (c) slapping your flippers against the keyboard to generate paragraphs. Let everyone else procrastinate, daydream, and complain—spend your time sitting down and flapping your flippers.

While you read this book, remember that writing isn't a race or a game. Write as much or as little as you want. Don't feel that you ought to write more than you want to write, and don't publish fluffy nonsense just for the sake of publishing. Don't mistake people with a lot of publications for people with a lot of good ideas. Our aim is to write up what we're passionate about while still having a life.

In Chapter 2, we'll have a look at our most common reasons for not writing. I will show how to overcome these specious barriers by making a *writing schedule*—the idea that animates our approach to productive writing. Chapter 3 delves into writing schedules and describes some motivational tools for sticking to your fledgling schedule, such as setting good goals, managing many projects at once, and tracking your writing

progress. To bolster your new habits, you can start a writing group with some friends. Chapter 4 describes a few flavors of writing groups and offers advice for forming a group that does more than vent and grouse. In Chapter 5, we look at strategies for writing well. Well-written papers and grant proposals stand out from the pack, and we should strive to write as well as we can.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 apply the principles of writing a lot. Chapter 6 gives a practical, in-the-trenches view of writing articles for peer-reviewed journals. If you work in an IMRAD field—Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion—this chapter offers advice for crafting strong manuscripts and navigating the shoals of peer review. In Chapter 7, we turn to writing books. Whether you are wading through your first book or thinking you might want to write one someday, this chapter considers some common questions and dilemmas. And in Chapter 8, we explore grant and fellowship proposals—perhaps the grimmest genre of academic writing—and learn how to improve your long-run odds of finding success with fickle funding agencies. Finally, Chapter 9 concludes this brief book with some encouraging words.

Specious Barriers to Writing a Lot

Writing is a grim business, much like repairing a sewer or running a mortuary. Although I've never dressed a corpse, I'm sure that it's easier to embalm the dead than to write an article about it. Writing is hard, which is why so many of us do so little of it. When they talk about writing, professors and graduate students usually sound thwarted. They want to tackle their article or get to their book, but some big and stubborn barrier is holding them back.

I call these *specious barriers*: They look like legitimate reasons for not writing at first glance but crumble under critical scrutiny. In this chapter, we'll look askance at the most common barriers to writing a lot and describe simple ways to climb over them.

SPECIOUS BARRIER 1

"I can't find time to write," aka "I would write more if I could just find big blocks of time."

This barrier is the big one, the Ur-barrier from which most writing struggles descend. But as popular as it is, the belief that we can't find time to write is still specious—much like the belief that people use only 10% of their brains. Like most false beliefs, this barrier persists because it's comforting. It's reassuring to believe that circumstances are against us and that we would write more if only our weekly schedule had more big chunks of open time. Our friends around the department understand this barrier because they struggle with writing too. And so we thrash through the copse and thicket of the work week, hoping to stumble out eventually into the open prairie.

Why is this barrier specious? The key is the word *find*. When people endorse this specious barrier, I imagine them roaming through their schedules like naturalists in search of "Time to Write," that most elusive and secretive of creatures. Do we need to "find time to teach?" Nope—we have a teaching schedule, and we don't fail to show up for our classes. If you think that writing time is lurking somewhere, hidden deep within your weekly schedule, you won't write a lot. If you think that you won't be able to write until a big block of time arrives, such as spring break or the summer months, then writing your book will take forever.

Instead of *finding* time to write, *allot* time to write. People who write a lot make a writing schedule and stick to it. Let's take a few moments to think about a writing schedule that would work for you. Ponder your

typical work week: are there some hours that are generally free *every week*? If you teach on Tuesdays and Thursdays, maybe Monday and Wednesday mornings are good times to write. If you're free and mentally alert in the afternoons, maybe times later in the day would work well for you. If you have a friend who would like to sit and write with you in a quiet room every Friday from 9:00 a.m. to noon, perhaps the two of you could prove that misery does love company.

Chapter 3 digs into the care and feeding of writing schedules, so we'll have much more to say about picking and fine-tuning a schedule then. For now, think of writing as a class that you teach. Most classes are around 3 to 6 hours each week, so schedule 4 hours for your "writing class" during the normal work week. Four hours doesn't sound like much, but it's plenty—approximately 240 minutes more than most people write in a typical week, in fact. Each person will have a different set of good times for writing, given his or her other commitments. *The key is the habit—the week-in, week-out regularity—not the number of days, the number of hours, or the time of day.* It doesn't matter if you pick one day a week or all five weekdays—just choose regular times, chisel them into the granite of your weekly calendar, and write during those times.

I've followed many schedules over the years. My first writing schedule, based on the fragments I can assemble from my parenthood-induced amnesia, was from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m., Monday through Friday. I would set my alarm for 8:00 a.m., grouse about the

inhumanly early hour, and then write for 2 hours at home. Looking back, I have to snicker at my past self. I felt so hard-core when I woke up at 8:00 a.m., like I should drink raw eggs, rack up a barbell, and get a neck tattoo after wrapping up the day's writing. Having kids put an end to that idyllic writing schedule, so I shifted to writing from 5:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m. at home every weekday—sticking to that schedule for a few years merits a barbed wire neck tattoo. For the past few years, I write on campus after dropping the kids off at school, roughly from 7:50 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.

Instead of scheduled writing, most academics use a stressful and inefficient strategy called *binge writing* (Kellogg, 1994). The drama of binge writing has three acts. First, people spend at least a month or two intending to write, ruminating about their half-done project, and stewing in guilt and worry. Eventually, anxiety over the looming project goads them into claiming a huge chunk of time—perhaps a whole Saturday or the week of spring break—during which they fling themselves at their neglected project with the cold and steely determination of someone suiting up to investigate an odd smell coming from the crawl space. Finally, after an eyebrow-singeing blaze of typing, they emerge hours later, weary and bedraggled, covered in coffee grounds and printer toner, relieved to have more words on the page, but discouraged at how hard-fought those words were.

And then the binge-writing cycle begins anew—more waiting, more worry, more eyebrow-singeing.

Binge writers spend more time feeling guilty about not writing than schedule-followers spend writing. Writing schedules, aside from fostering much more writing, dampen the drama that surrounds academic writing. When you follow a schedule, you stop worrying about not writing, stop complaining about not finding time to write, and stop indulging in ludicrous fantasies about how much you'll write over the summer. Instead, you write during your allotted times and then forget about it. We have better things to worry about than writing, such as whether we're drinking too much coffee or why the cats have started hoarding knitting needles and steel wool. But we needn't worry about finding time to write: I'll just get back to this book tomorrow at around 7:50 a.m.

People are often surprised by the notion of scheduling. "Is that really the trick?" they ask. "Isn't there another way to write a lot?" There are some options you could consider—irrational hope, cursed stubbornness, or intensive hypnotherapy that transforms you into the kind of person who finds writing fun and easy—but, for most of us, making a writing schedule and sticking to it is our best option. After researching the work habits of successful writers, Ralph Keyes (2003) noted that "the simple fact of sitting down to write day after day is what makes writers productive" (p. 49). If you allot 4 hours a week for writing, you will be astounded at how much you will write in a single semester. In time, you'll find yourself committing unthinkable academic heresies. You'll submit grant proposals early; you'll revise and resubmit

manuscripts quickly; and, one day, you'll say something indelicate when your pal in the department says, "This semester is killing me—I can't wait for the summer so I can finally do some writing."

SPECIOUS BARRIER 2

"I need to do some more analyses first," aka, "I need to read a few more articles/books/letters/epigraphs/scrolls."

Like all specious barriers, the idea that "I need to do more prep work first" sounds reasonable. "After all," you might say, "you can't write something without a lot of reading." But there's a line between productivity and procrastination—a deep trench, really, that more than a few assistant professors have fallen into while walking to the library to pick up the last book they need to read before starting to write their own.

Academic culture reinforces this barrier. We respect perfectionism and diligence. We know that scholarship requires freakish amounts of reading, laborious data analysis, and regrettably necessary trips to inconvenient archives in Barcelona and Paris. But binge writers are also binge readers and binge statisticians. The bad habits that keep them from getting down to writing also keep them from doing the *prewriting* (Kellogg, 1994)—the reading, outlining, organizing, brainstorming, planning, and number-crunching necessary for typing words.

It's easy to pull away this creaky crutch—do whatever you need to do during your allotted writing time.

Just as it's easy to put off typing, it's easy to put off the prep work, so stuff it all into the scheduled time. Need to crunch some more stats? Need to read some articles, review page proofs, or read books about writing and publishing? Your writing schedule has the space for all that.

Writing is more than typing words. For me, writing's endpoint is sending an article to a journal, a book to a publisher, or a grant proposal to a funding agency. Any activity that gets me closer to that goal counts as writing. When writing journal articles, for example, I often spend a few consecutive writing periods working on the analyses. Sometimes I spend a whole writing period on ignominious aspects of writing, like reviewing a journal's submission guidelines, making figures and tables, or checking page proofs.

Academic writing has many parts. We will never "find the time" to retrieve and read all of the necessary articles, just as we'll never "find the time" to write a review of those articles. This is another reason why scheduling time to write is the way to write a lot.

SPECIOUS BARRIER 3

"To write a lot, I need a new computer" (see also "fancy productivity software," "a nice office chair," "a better desk," "a home office").

Of all the specious barriers, this is the most desperate. I'm not sure that people really believe this one—unlike the other barriers, this may be a mere excuse. When

I started writing seriously during graduate school, I bought an ancient computer from a fellow student's boyfriend. This computer was prehistoric even by 1996 standards—no mouse, no Windows, just a keyboard, a soothing blue DOS screen, and WordPerfect 5.0. When the computer died, taking some of my files with it to its grave, I bought a laptop that I typed into the ground. Even now, I'm writing this book on a "state-contract special" that is so old that it occasionally scowls and shakes its fist at me from its porch rocker. My laser printer is now old enough to run for a city council seat.

If you find yourself blaming your lack of "productivity tools"—an Orwellian euphemism for "high-tech procrastination devices"—remember the inkwell and typewriter. What would your 1920s scholarly self, with its rakish pocket watch or fetching bob, say if it overheard you pining for some fancy new software or device? And what would you say if you heard your 1920s self and its excuses?

- "Blast it all, someone else has the card catalog drawer I need—I can't possibly work on my book today."
- "Curses, reading that source would require walking across campus, entering the library, and retrieving physical printed matter. The indignity!"
- "I'm waiting for the next generation of typewriters to come out before starting my next book. I hear they'll have a number *l* key so I won't have to press the lowercase *l* key when typing dates. Think of how much faster I'll write!"

Scholars wrote lots of books—big, fascinating, profound, important books—before digital "productivity tools" were invented. Indeed, one wonders if writing was easier for them. They could simply write, happily hunting-and-pecking away without the itchy suspicion that someone, somewhere, just said something on the Internet.

What about chairs and desks and rooms? For nearly a decade I used a metal folding chair as my official writing chair. When the folding chair retired, I replaced it with a more stylish, but equally hard, vintage fiberglass chair. For the curious, Figure 2.1 shows where I wrote this book's first edition. That room had a big, simple desk with my laser printer (in its jejune days) and

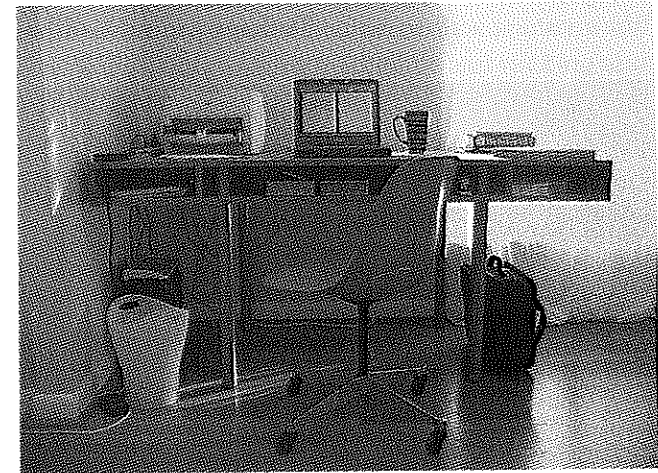


FIGURE 2.1. My writing room from long ago.

a coaster for my coffee. Before I splurged on that desk, I had a \$10 particleboard folding table, which in a nod to fashion I covered with a \$4 tablecloth. I wrote most of a book (Silvia, 2006) and a couple dozen articles sitting on my folding chair in front of that folding table.

The more I write, the worse my writing environs become. I've been working at my university long enough to know where the unloved and deserted rooms are, so I usually do my morning writing in a lab room that resembles a place that scientists hastily abandoned in the opening scene of a disaster movie. Figure 2.2 shows where I wrote most of a recent book (Silvia, 2015) and much of the second edition of this one. Note the hard plastic chair and particleboard table with a stylish fake wood-grain top—I've gone full-circle, I suppose.

Unproductive writers often bemoan the lack of "their own space" to write. Perhaps parenthood has

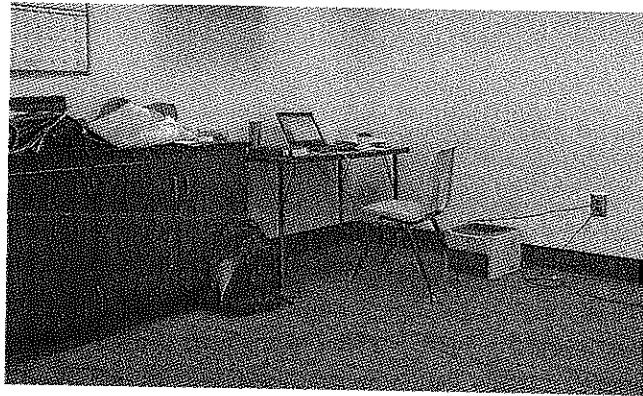


FIGURE 2.2. A recent writing hovel.

shifted my standards, but any space where stuffed animals are unlikely to hit the back of my head will suffice. In a string of small apartments and houses, I wrote on a small table in the living room, in my bedroom, in the guest bedroom, in the master bedroom, and even (briefly) in a bathroom. I wrote the first edition of this book in the guest bedroom in my old house. But that room was eventually lost to cribs and changing tables, so I set up a lounge chair, lamp, printer, and coffee coaster at the end of a hallway. Even now, I don't have my own space at home to write. But I don't need it—there's always a free bathroom.

"In order to write," wrote Saroyan (1952), all a person needs "is paper and a pencil" (p. 42). In fact, Saroyan might have overstated it. As Fowler (2006) reminded us, "You can write only with your brain" (p. 1). We can't pin the blame on old computers and slow WiFi—only making a schedule and sticking to it will make us productive writers.

SPECIOUS BARRIER 4

"I'm waiting until I feel like it," aka, "I write best when I'm inspired to write."

You usually hear this barrier among writers who really, really don't want to make a writing schedule. "My best work comes when I'm inspired," they say. "It's no use trying to write when I'm not in the mood. I need to *feel* like writing." This barrier is cruel because it is half-true. We all have moments when we feel inspired—we lose

sense of time, the sentences tumble out, and what we write, as F. Scott Fitzgerald (1955) eloquently put it, is “good, good, good” (p. 7).

Inspiration is like a slot machine. The problem isn't that inspiration never strikes, it's that inspiration strikes erratically and unpredictably. Flow's fickle quality is what hooks us. That's why so many people wait for inspired moments to hit, puzzled about why the muse is forsaking them and their footnotes.

Inspired moments are precious, but we needn't wait for inspiration to do good work. Robert Boice (1990) gathered a small sample of college professors who struggled with writing, and he randomly assigned them to use different writing strategies (p. 79). People in an *abstinence* condition were forbidden from all non-emergency writing; people in a *spontaneous* condition scheduled 50 writing sessions but wrote only when they felt inspired; and people in a *contingency management* condition scheduled 50 writing sessions and were forced to write during each session. (They had to send a check to a disliked organization if they didn't do their writing. The resulting incoming junk mail would have hurt more than the money.) The outcome variables were the number of pages written per day and the number of creative ideas per day.

Figure 2.3 shows what Boice found. First, people in the contingency management condition wrote *a lot*—they wrote 3.5 times as many pages as people in the spontaneous condition and 16 times as much as those in the abstinence condition. People who wrote “when they felt

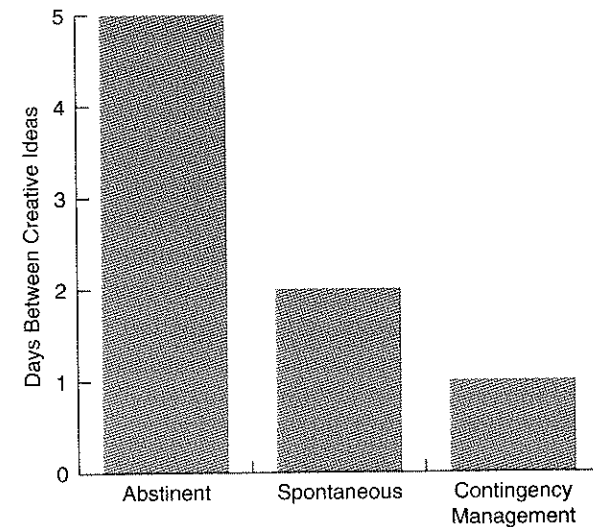
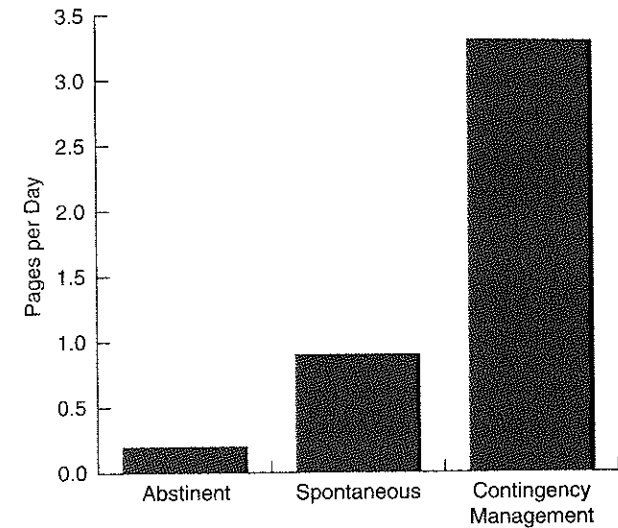


FIGURE 2.3. The effects of different writing strategies on (top) the number of pages written per day and (bottom) the modal number of days between creative writing ideas. Data from Boice (1990).

like it” were barely more productive than people told not to write at all—inspiration is overrated. Second, forcing people to write boosted their creative ideas for writing. The typical number of days between creative ideas was merely 1 day for people who were forced to write; it was 2 days for people in the spontaneous condition and 5 days for people in the abstinence condition. Writing breeds more good ideas for writing.

Another reason not to wait for inspiration is that some kinds of writing are so unpleasant that no one will ever feel like doing them. Who wakes up in the morning with an urge to write about “Specific Aims” and “Consortium/Contractual Arrangements?” Who enjoys writing awkward and self-conscious “yay, me!” personal statements for fellowships? If you have moods where you’re gripped by a desire to read the Department of Health and Human Services *Grants.gov Application Guide SF424 (R&R)*, you have a bright future. But the rest of us need much more than “feeling like it” to finish a grant or fellowship proposal.

Struggling writers who “wait for inspiration” should get off their high horse and join the unwashed masses of real academic writers. The ancient Greeks assigned muses for poetry, music, and tragedy, but they didn’t mention a muse for references and footnotes. Our writing is important, but we don’t have fans lurking outside the conference hotel hoping for our autographs on recent issues of the *Journal of Vision Science*. We want our writing to be as good as it can be, but we’ll settle for “be” if we can’t get “good.”

Ralph Keyes (2003) has shown that great novelists and poets—people who we think should wait for inspiration—reject the notion of writing when inspired. The prolific Anthony Trollope (1883/1999) wrote that

there are those . . . who think that the man who works with his imagination should allow himself to wait till—inspiration moves him. When I have heard such doctrine preached, I have hardly been able to repress my scorn. To me it would not be more absurd if the shoe-maker were to wait for inspiration, or the tallow-chandler for the divine moment of melting. . . . I was once told that the surest aid to the writing of a book was a piece of cobbler’s wax on my chair. I certainly believe in the cobbler’s wax much more than the inspiration. (p. 121)

How do these great writers write instead? Successful professional writers, regardless of whether they’re writing novels, nonfiction, poetry, or drama are prolific because they write regularly—usually daily. As Keyes (2003) put it, “Serious writers *write*, inspired or not. Over time they discover that routine is a better friend to them than inspiration” (p. 49). One might say that they make a schedule and stick to it.

SPECIOUS BARRIER 5

“I should clear the decks before getting down to writing,” aka, “I’ll write even faster later on if I wrap up all this other stuff first.”

This barrier involves ingenious self-deception. We convince ourselves that by avoiding writing, we are

actually writing faster. "Sure, I could write a couple pages this week," we say to ourselves, "but if I spend this week clearing the decks of grading and service, then I'll have a clear mind and can write much faster next week." Indeed, a tell-tale sign that spring break is a week away is the sudden flowering of calculus among the humanities professors. "Why write two pages this week and four next week, for an average of three pages per week, when I could write zero this week and 10 next week, for an average of five per week?" they'll say. "It's all about the rates and slopes, people!" If anything could make a Renaissance historian dig into partial derivatives and Laplace approximations, avoiding working on a book is it.

"Clearing the decks" is mental alchemy: We transmute the lead of procrastination into the gold of efficiency. But let's be candid with ourselves. By avoiding writing for a week and throwing ourselves into other tasks, we aren't planning, preparing, or positioning ourselves for a great bout of writing later—we're just procrastinating. And those decks are never going to be clear. We can sweep the jetsam of e-mail and memos and reviews from our humble rowboat, but when our bosses clear the decks of their enormous container ships and luxury yachts, where do you think their rubbish lands? A professor's decks are never clear: there will always be barnacles to scrape, cannons to polish, and scurvy-stricken grad students to free from the brig.

When you use a weekly writing schedule, you stop seeing some weeks as lost causes. The first week of

class? Follow your writing schedule. The last week of class? Writing schedule. The week before spring break? Writing schedule. And spring break itself? Maybe you should take spring break off—you've earned it.

CONCLUSION

Humans are immensely creative animals. No other species can come up with such fiendishly compelling excuses for not writing, and only people can make procrastination look productive. Bonobos and orangutans, for example, just sit around and groom each other when they don't want to work on their dissertations, but humans will throw themselves into reading and grading and learning new citation software.

This chapter has debunked some common reasons people give for not writing this week, from searching for time to clearing the decks. We've all indulged in these mental comfort blankets, but it's hard to type when you're wrapped in a blanket. Instead, I developed this book's core idea—academics should schedule time for writing much like we schedule time for teaching and tackle writing's many tasks during that time.

Writing schedules are simple in theory but not always easy in practice. What are good times and places to pick? What project should we tackle first? How can we defend our frail schedules against the work week's many time predators? The next chapter describes some simple tools for turning your fledgling schedule into a fearsome writing habit.