Second Edition

How to Write a Lot

A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing

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3

The Care and Feeding of Writing Schedules

Your writing schedule is like is a class that you teach. Just as your other classes meet regularly each week, week-in and week-out, regardless of whether the week is a busy week or an idle week or the semester's first or last week, regardless of whether it is sunny or drizzling, regardless of whether that day's topic is beloved or wretched, your writing class should meet regularly each week, week-in and week-out, so you can patiently teach yourself what you know (Zinsser, 1988). If you like, you can give your writing class an apt course title: perhaps "Anxiety and Panic Disorders," if you're in psychology, "Calamity and Crisis: My Book, 2019–Present," if you're in history, or "Hitting the 'Wall' in 'Qualitative Inquiry,'" if you're in education.

And just as the threshold for canceling your other classes is high—you can stay home if you have a family crisis, an infectious disease, or an embarrassing facial

rash shaped like New Zealand—you can miss your writing class only for good reasons. Don't tell your writing course's only student that you canceled that day's class because you "just weren't feeling it" or "had a bunch of e-mail and grading to catch up on." You're both the teacher and the student, so it will probably be your fault if the end-of-semester teaching evaluations are hostile.

But unlike our other classes, our writing-schedule class is invisible: our department heads and deans aren't scheduling weekly times, booking writing rooms, and keeping an eye on things. The motivation to write needs to come from inside, that squishy place where the motivation to exercise, eat right, and spend less time on the Internet are hiding. This chapter thus describes some motivational tips and tools to get your writing schedule off to a good start.

When Should I Write? Picking Good Times

In my experience, once people have followed a writing schedule for about a month, they'll be fine, but getting to that point requires some planning. Picking the right days and times is most of the battle. The actual days and times don't matter much, as long as they are *defensible* and *biologically realistic*. A defensible time is like a big castle on a steep hill surrounded by a moat full of ravenous grad students—it won't be invaded by the hordes of service, meetings, and marginalia. For example, 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. is a convenient time to

write but a hard time to defend—everyone wants to hold meetings and classes then. But 8:00 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.? That's an easy time for me to defend. What are your most defensible times? If you don't think you can defend a time slot 90% of the time, the slot is too precarious for your writing schedule.

Defending your writing schedule can require stubbornness and misdirection. People who would never ask you to cancel class to meet with them will see your writing time as expendable. If you say "I'm writing then," they hear, "Oh, she's free then." It's okay to say simply that you "already have a meeting then" and sell it with a knowing eye-roll. Meetings are the above-ground pool professors swim in, so they'll understand. (If you're feeling scurrilous, you can say your meeting is about assessment or accreditation—no administrator would dare interfere with such noble and vaunted work.) One reason why writing groups work, I suspect, is because you really do have a meeting at your writing time, and it's easy and truthful to say, "I have a weekly meeting across campus then." I know some sneaky people who slate their writing times as fake meetings with each other in their department's shared calendar so their colleagues and bosses can't impose meetings then.

Our brains burn brighter at some times of the day, and biologically realistic writing schedules use our high-energy times. In her study of professional writers, Perry (1999) found that around two thirds write in the morning and around a third write in the evening. Not

surprisingly, around two thirds of adults are morning people (e.g., Carrier, Monk, Buysse, & Kupfer, 1997), so Perry's writers are respecting their brains. If you pick writing times when your brain is perky, wearing its running shoes and retro headband, you'll write more easily and creatively. But if you pick times when your brain is sleepy or burned out, it will wander away from your footnotes in search of its old sweatpants. You probably know when your best times are, but just ask your brain if you're unsure.

I like writing every weekday, and daily writing has some virtues. Your project stays fresh in your mind, so you'll lose less time finding your files and decoding your unhinged scrawls from the prior writing period. And it's telling, I think, that productive writers typically write daily (Perry, 1999). But writing every weekday isn't always practical, so go with what's realistic. If the vagaries of teaching schedules and family life give you only 1 or 2 days a week, go with that. Many scholars in think tanks or in clinical research, for example, are assigned personal research time, often a full- or half-day once a week. If the boss assigns you Friday morning for writing, then that's your weekly writing schedule. Writing every weekday is nice, but the best writing schedule is the one you can stick to consistently.

Always write during your scheduled time, but don't be dogmatic about writing only within this time. If you want to keep writing once the time is done, or if some time opens up on a non-writing day, go ahead. I call this *windfall writing*. Beware, however, of the temptation to

supplant your writing schedule with windfall writing. Don't be the writing version of the person who says, "I don't usually eat apple fritters, but I worked out hard yesterday so it's okay." Writers can't hoard a bumper crop of words to get us through the lean weeks, so we shouldn't reward writing with nonwriting.

Where Should I Write? Picking Good Places

Just as there's no one time that's best for everyone, there's no one best place. Academics write in a freakishly diverse collection of environments (Sword, 2017), from home offices to library carrels, park benches to sandy beaches, coffee shops to public libraries, torch-lit dungeons to abandoned sawmills. If it works, it works. If the gentle scraping and clinking sounds in the abandoned sawmill spark your muse, no one's judging.

But we should be honest with ourselves about the place we pick. Is it really a productive place to write, or is it merely fun, appealing, and convenient? Do we get a lot of writing done there, or is it merely a pleasant place to while away an hour with our laptop open? The human capacity for procrastination is awe-inspiring, and one does wonder if people are slyly avoiding writing by picking loud, distracting places where their pals are likely to interrupt them. Coffee shops, for example, have an idyllic appeal for academic writers. Perhaps you really are productive there. But if you like writing in coffee shops because you can have a great latte while

illustrating how a method actor would play the role of "plucky assistant professor with an overdue book manuscript," then you need a new place. Any town large enough for a coffee shop will have a quiet public library.

When you find a nice place, stick to it. Habits come from repetition—doing the same behaviors with the same stuff in the same place at the same times. Our brains settle in for writing faster when they detect that they are in the writing place at the writing time. When your brain sees the abandoned sawmill's bat nests and belt sanders, it will think, "Time to write my book!"

What Should I Do? Setting Goals and Tracking Progress

So you have a time and a place: What do you want to write? You might have only one big writing goal, like the dreaded book manuscript you've been avoiding since the last solstice. But you probably have many more—a motley melange of journal articles, invited chapters, book reviews, grant proposals, and conference papers. If so, it's time to take inventory: grab a clipboard, put a pencil behind your ear, and drag all your writing aspirations off the shelves to find any dusty and forgotten ones. Make a big list of everything you'd like to write—your *project goals*—in the next year or two. These goals will range from *definitely* to *fantasy*, but don't judge them just yet.

For example, I keep a list of project goals on a white board at work (and a digital back-up, of course,

in case the white board-eating bacteria strike again). The writing projects are divided into *research articles*, *review and theory articles*, and *books*. Some of the projects have been up there long enough to have etched into the melamine, but it helps to have a list so that I know what to tackle next when one project wraps up.

Once you have all your writing goals in one place, it's time to pick one and get writing. The world's oldest productivity advice—after "construct a sundial and Gregorian calendar"—is to break your big, unwieldy goals into tiny, tractable ones. A goal like "turn my dissertation into a book" is too large and lumpy to guide your day-in, day-out work. At the start of your writing period, after shooing the bats away, take a couple moments to think about what you want to accomplish that day.

Day-level goals should be concrete, the kind of goals that you can judge if you meet them. Goals starting with phrases like *work on*, *get started*, or *think about* are too mushy. Consider goals with obvious end-points, like completing a fixed unit of writing. Exhibit 3.1 lists some examples. A clear goal is usually finishing part of your project—like a paragraph, section, or chapter—or finishing a set number of words. Popular with humanities scholars working on books, word goals are wonderful when your project needs some pages. The irrepressible Anthony Trollope, writing with watch at hand, had the concrete goal of 250 words every 15 minutes (Pope-Hennessy, 1971). Those of us who aren't writing romantic political novels might

EXHIBIT 3.1. Daily Writing Goals

The best daily writing goals are concrete. Instead of setting a goal of "get some writing done," consider goals like these for the day's writing period:

- Write at least 200 words.
- Print the first draft I finished yesterday, edit it, and finish the second section.
- Write the first two paragraphs of the Discussion.
- Add missing references and then reconcile the citations and references.
- Read a collaborator's draft, give comments on it, and e-mail it back.
- Make an outline for my next journal article.
- Finish the Specific Aims page.
- Read and take notes on three background articles.
- Read the reviewers' comments on my paper and make a list of things to revise.
- Correct the page proofs and submit them.
- Read some sample grant proposals to get some tips.
- Take an inventory of all my writing projects and list them on my white board.
- Finish the footnotes for Chapter 4.

consider 50 to 200 words an hour. I'm happy if I can get one great sentence.

Nothing helps a writing schedule like tracking your progress. In years past, the notion of monitoring and keeping statistics on your writing would seem immodest and narcissistic. In the more enlightened present, however, people eagerly track pounds shed, steps taken, carbs gobbled, hours slept, and gluten snorted. In a

world where people track their bowel movements, rate them on the Bristol Stool Scale, and then share the results online, I suppose tracking how many words you write seems prosaic.

Self-monitoring—keeping tabs on your own behavior—is one of the oldest and best ways of changing behavior (Korotitsch & Nelson-Gray, 1999). It is based on two sound principles of psychology: (a) people aren't paying much attention to what they are doing, and (b) even if they are, they delude themselves about their bad habits. But once people keep records of their daily behaviors for a couple weeks and confront their honest daily records of how much money they frittered away, how often they complained, and how many doughnut holes they gobbled, the stage is set for real change.

Just as people counting steps will take a few more dogged laps around the building so their step counter will pass an arbitrary number, writers tracking their writing can be oddly motivated by the fear of typing a zero into their writing log. Merely tracking a behavior is often enough to change it. People who track their writing focus on different things. Some people track *word goals*, usually with a target of 50 to 250 words per day. Others track *behavior goals*, such as whether they sat down and wrote at all during their scheduled time. And still others track *time goals*, such as writing for a certain number of minutes. A popular time goal involves counting "pomodoros," periods of focused, uninterrupted writing (usually 25 minutes) named after retro tomato timers (Cirillo, 2018). You can pick what

works for you: The key is to take an honest look at what you're doing. I usually track whether I sat down and wrote, scored simply as *no* or *yes*, but I find word goals motivating for long projects.

As for how to keep track, I've met people who record their writing progress in everything from fancy statistics programs to online forums to life-hacking apps to wall calendars with smiley-face stickers. There's no best way, but remember what we learned earlier about procrastinating via productivity tools (see Chapter 2)—you don't need a flashy program to monitor and track your writing. Scratching a crude check mark on the sawmill wall wastes less time than scouring the Internet for that perfect app.

Like their dogs and cats, humans will do almost anything for a small reward. When an article goes off to a journal, a book proposal is sent to a publisher, and a grant proposal is hurled into the black hole of probability theory, you can mark the moment with a nice cup of coffee, a good lunch with a friend, or a vintage Hamilton 992B pocket watch. Writing's rewards are delayed—it takes months and months to hear from journal editors and grant panels—so immediate self-rewards will sustain your motivation. But beware the temptation to reward writing with not writing. We don't reward a great day in the classroom by canceling the next class; we don't reward a day of abstaining from smoking by bumming a cigarette; we don't reward diligent, productive writing by blowing off the schedule that got us there.

What's Worth Writing First? Setting Priorities

The only thing harder than writing is writing two things at once. Working on one writing project is easy, but juggling many writing projects—some long, some short; some old, some fresh; some important, some barely worth writing—is endlessly vexing. And we rarely get to write only one thing. It's easy to say, "I'm working only on my book this semester," or "I'm not leaving the sawmill until my grant proposal is done," but ever-pesky reality intrudes. While working on the book or grant or touchstone article, many other projects will drift down onto your writing pile: abstracts and papers for conferences, letters-of-intent and proposals for grants and fellowships, short journal articles, book reviews, invitations to revise from an unexpectedly fast journal, and invited book chapters, to name a handful.

Humans don't multitask well. We have big brains and nimble thumbs, but those brains and thumbs find big to-do lists stressful. When people have several pressing goals, you often see what motivation scientists call *behavioral chatter* (Atkinson & Birch, 1970)—people flit from goal to goal, dabbling and switching without making much progress on any particular one. If academic writers don't set some sort of priority rules for managing their tasks, they'll end up like a harried hummingbird with an overdue manuscript.

To avoid chattering, we should pick a way of setting priorities. Exhibit 3.2 lists the most common ones along

EXHIBIT 3.2. Priority Rules for Managing Many Writing Projects

So you find yourself with a big backlog of projects—what should you write first?

***The most important project*: The project closest to your scholarly heart—usually a book, big grant proposal, or touchstone article in a research program—gets done first.**

- *The good:* Your most influential, high-impact scholarship will reach the world before your secondary, peripheral work.
- *The bad:* Your most important work might be long-form, taking months or years. It is often impossible to stave off competing projects for more than 6 months.

***Whatever is closest to publication*: The project that is nearest the door—comments for a collaborator, a revision to resubmit, or a half-done manuscript—gets done first.**

- *The good:* You won't end up with the menagerie of half-done projects that many academics have, and your backlog will dwindle as projects get punched out.
- *The bad:* Work that is closest to publication might be your least important or interesting work, and ambitious long-form projects get deferred.

***The oldest project (first in, first out [FIFO])*: The project you started first gets done first—everything gets knocked out in order.**

- *The good:* The backlog dwindles quickly as projects get finished.
- *The bad:* The older projects might have grown stale, and the newer projects might be fresher and more relevant. Your newest ideas are probably your most mature and informed ideas. Time-sensitive projects, such as book chapters and grants, will suffer.

EXHIBIT 3.2. Priority Rules for Managing Many Writing Projects *(continued)*

***The easiest project*: Whatever project is easiest to finish gets tackled first.**

- *The good:* Everyone likes a quick win, and this approach lets you knock things out.
- *The bad:* Your most influential scholarship is rarely the easiest to write. Your books, grant proposals, and top-tier articles won't get done.

***The most appealing project*: Impulsively jump into whatever feels coolest and inspiring.**

- *The good:* Writing will be fun.
- *The bad:* We can't trust our impulses to point us toward our most important and difficult work, so long-range projects will suffer. Excitement and appeal can get people started, but projects get abandoned midway when the ardor cools.

with their virtues and flaws. Managing many projects is a fiendish optimality problem in which writing's big variables—if a project is important, urgent, old, fresh, easy, or fun—tug against each other. Because there's no global solution that's best in all cases, each rule for setting priorities in Exhibit 3.2 has its good and bad sides. I thus have no grand answer to what I see as academic writing's most intractable problem. The best we can do is to reflect honestly about why we're working on a project—did we pick it because it's easy or because it's important?—and to ask if we're making the most of that week's precious writing time.

Frequently Grumbled Grumblings About Writing Schedules

"I'm Just Not the Scheduling Kind of Person"

When confronted, binge writers often say, "I'm just not the kind of person who's good at making a schedule and sticking to it." This is mostly nonsense. Psychologists know that people use essentialist, "I'm not that kind of" explanations when they don't want to change (Jellison, 1993). People who claim that they're "not the scheduling kind of person" are governed by all sorts of schedules—we teach at the same times, go to recurring meetings at the same times, and get lunch and coffee at the same times. If we looked at our weeks honestly, even the most flighty academic has as much structure and routine as a trusted inmate at a minimum-security prison.

You don't have to be the kind of person who schedules time for ironing dish towels to follow a writing schedule. Such people really do resonate to routines, but following a writing schedule is easy for even the flakiest among us. Most of our weekly structure comes from our environment, which nudges our behavior. If we want to change what we do—like write more regularly—we can arrange our environment to nudge us to do it. Pick some defensible times and write in the same spot during those times for a couple weeks. Eventually, following that writing schedule will be just another of your routines.

"But We're Just All so Different"

You usually hear "but we're all so different—not everything works for everyone" when someone is reluctant to try something new. As a psychology professor, I can assure you that people really are all so different and unique in uniquely different ways. But people are also all the same—such are the contradictions of psychology (Kluckhohn & Murray, 1948). This book isn't trying to change you as a person. You don't need new values, identities, critical models, worldviews, or hairstyles to write more efficiently. You are fine just the way you are. But if you find that writing is slower and more frustrating than it needs to be, consider making a unique writing schedule and writing something different and unique during those times.

"What About Writer's Block? You Can't Control That"

"Hold on," you might say. "So far, this book hasn't said anything about writer's block. Sure, you can make a schedule, set goals, and monitor your progress, but what happens when you get writer's block?" Like glamorous shopping sprees and perfect first dates, writer's block is a charming notion that exists only in movie montages: the afflicted writer who sharpens pencils, refills the coffee mug, and repeatedly types and deletes the same sentence before stomping off in a huffy cloud of despair.

When people tell me they have writer's block, I ask, "What on earth are you trying to write?" Academic

writers cannot get writer's block. It is hard to do what we do, but let's be candid—the prose we write is less timeless than deathless. The subtlety of our linear regression analysis will not move readers to tears, although the tediousness of it might. Readers will not photocopy our reference list and pass it out to friends whom they wish to inspire. Novelists and poets are the landscape artists and portrait painters; academic writers are the people with big sprayers who repaint your basement.

Writer's block is a good example of a *dispositional fallacy*: A description of behavior can't also explain the described behavior. Writer's block is nothing more than the behavior of not writing. Saying that you can't write because of writer's block is merely saying that you can't write because you aren't writing. It's trivial. Giving a fancy name to feeling frustrated with your writing makes your frustration seem more grave and complex than it is. The cure for writer's block—if you can cure a specious affliction—is writing. Recall Boice's (1990) experiment described in Chapter 2. In that study, struggling writers wrote more when they simply followed a schedule—that's all it took. They probably didn't enjoy it, and they probably spent much of their scheduled time scowling at a blank page, but they sat down and wrote a couple good paragraphs in between scowls. Struggling writers who waited until they "felt like it," in contrast, wrote almost nothing.

I feel like a participant in Boice's study sometimes. Having tracked my weekday writing for many years,

I think each day's work can be described with three dimensions:

- *Vexation*: some days, writing was fun; other days, it was frustrating.
- *Quality*: some days, I liked what I wrote; other days, I was embarrassed by it.
- *Quantity*: some days, I wrote a lot; other days, I got only a sentence.

These three factors are uncorrelated—I get all possible combinations. I often write a lot of good stuff when writing was painful; I often write a lot of chaff when writing was fun; and I often squeeze out only one perfect sentence during a day when writing was fun or vexing. I suppose you could take one point in the three-dimensional space—a frustrating day when the output is small and bad—and call it "writer's block," but I'm not sure what giving a label to a lone day's experience buys us.

Writer's block isn't a real thing: it's a shorthand label for "sometimes writing is especially hard" that some people elevate to an inscrutable, fickle force. Just as aliens abduct only people who believe in alien abductions, writer's block afflicts only writers who believe in it. Productive writers follow their writing schedule regardless of whether they feel like writing. Some days they don't write much—writing is a grim business, after all—but they're nevertheless sitting and writing, oblivious to the otherworldly halo hovering above their house.

Conclusion

Writing is a class that you teach: a small class with one student who seems bright but sometimes needs a nudge to get her papers in on time. This chapter is like that student's helicopter parent—it considers some motivational tips and tools for sticking to your writing schedule, week-in and week-out. If you find the right times and places, set concrete goals, and track your progress, your writing-schedule class will be a smashing success—so successful, in fact, that other students will want to take it, a topic we turn to next.

4

Starting a Writing Group

Complaining is the birthright of professors everywhere, especially when the topic is writing: how we frittered away spring break on chores and chocolate, how our grant proposal sounds as compelling as a treatise on maritime law, how our dissertation is going so badly that we suspect that it's planning to break up with us. Complaining about writing is usually bad, especially when it invokes the specious barriers described in Chapter 2. But can we harness the proud scholarly tradition of grousing for the sake of good instead of evil? Can we apply our atavistic academic instinct toward collective kvetching to help us write a lot?

This chapter describes how you can create your own writing group. A good writing group will reinforce your writing schedule, make writing feel less solitary, and stave off the darkness of binge writing. These groups come in many flavors, as this chapter shows, so you'll probably find one that sounds tasty.