

Becoming a more productive writer

Helen Sword

Question:

How can I become a more prolific and productive academic writer?

Answer:

The most successful academics are those who write and publish prolifically. Few, however, find the writing process easy. In fact, the most engaging academic writers – those rare colleagues who have mastered the art of explaining complex concepts in illuminating prose – are often the ones who labour hardest over every sentence. But how do they find the *time*?

There is no magic bullet for becoming a faster writer. The key to productivity is not speed, fluency or habit – although all of those things help – so much as time management. Productive academic writers don't sit around worrying about writer's block or their lack of a quiet space to write in. They simply get on with it.

The following tips will help you become a more productive and prolific writer – *but only if you follow them*. If you read this article and then consign it to the 'too-hard' basket, nothing at all will change: neither your writing habits nor your productivity levels.

1. **Write every day.** Yes, every single weekday, even when you think you are 'too busy' to write. Research by Kellogg (1998), Boice (1989; 1990) and others has shown that 'binge writing' doesn't work; by the time you finally get to that free afternoon you've been looking forward to for weeks, you'll find that it takes you hours just to get your mind on task again. Robert Boice has shown that academics who write every day produce twice as much publishable prose *in the same number of hours* as those who only write occasionally. Even if you only devote 20 minutes a day to your writing, you will be making daily progress and, equally importantly, keeping your mental wheels constantly greased.
2. **Prioritise writing.** Schedule daily writing time into your diary the same way you schedule teaching or meetings – and keep your appointments! Most people find that early morning works best, as your mind is more alert and other obligations are less likely to get in the way. For example, you could get up half an hour early every morning and write before breakfast. You could walk your dog to a local cafe and write on your laptop while you drink your latte. You could arrive at work, shut your door, and spend an hour writing before you allow yourself to open your email or talk to colleagues. Experiment with a few different arrangements to find out what strategy suits you best – then schedule your writing into your diary and tell everyone (family, colleagues, friends, the dog) what you are doing and why.
3. **Plan how you will spend your writing time.** Set short-term (daily), medium-term (weekly/monthly) and long-term (quarterly/yearly) writing goals. Write them down and look at them every day before you start writing. Long-term goals – 'I want to boost my career by publishing a sole-authored article in a top international journal' – are the easiest to lose sight of but the most important to keep in mind. Measurable,

achievable short-term goals (e.g. 'Today I will spend one hour working on the first two paragraphs of my literature review') help you keep your writing on track.

4. **Monitor your progress.** Maintain a daily log in which you record the time you spent writing, the number of words gained and other relevant information, such as what writing conditions worked well or badly. Share your logs with others and report frequently on how you are doing; whenever you achieve a daily, weekly or monthly goal, celebrate your success! After keeping a detailed log for a few months, you will gain a much clearer idea of where and when you write most effectively and how much time you will need to complete a particular writing project – information that will in turn help you produce more realistic goals. For example, if you know that your average draft-to-article rate is 100 words per hour, you will think twice before volunteering to write a 'short' 3,000-word newsletter piece that will derail you for at least 30 hours from that much more important peer-reviewed article you are supposed to be working on.
5. **Write first, edit later.** Always use your writing time to *write*. This is one of the hardest tips for most writers to follow, but also one of the most important. Authors who constantly edit as they go can end up spending a whole hour or more writing a sentence, re-phrasing it, moving it to another paragraph, shifting it back to where it was originally – in short, doing anything but actually laying down new words. If this description fits your style of writing, make a conscious effort to break the edit-as-you-go habit. Set a timer for twenty or thirty minutes and resolve not to lift pen from paper (or fingers from keyboard) until the timer rings. Within just a few days or weeks, you will be gratified to find out how much you have produced during your daily writing jags. Schedule other, separate chunks of time for reading, data-crunching and editing.
6. **Write every day.** Many academics subscribe to the dispositional fallacy that they cannot write every day because they're 'not that kind of person' or they 'just don't work that way'. Nonsense! Becoming a prolific writer is a professional decision, not a personality trait. If the behaviours described here don't sound like you, then try role-playing: 'Today I will behave like the kind of person who writes every day'. Before long you will become that person.
7. **Start or join a writing group.** Regular meetings with a group of colleagues can provide you with motivation, feedback and camaraderie. Silvia (2007) describes several different types of productive writing groups, or you can develop your own. Here are a few possible models:
 - A group of colleagues meets monthly to discuss work-in-progress. At each meeting, two group members are given detailed verbal and written feedback about a draft article or chapter by the other members of the group, who have spent about one hour per article preparing for the meeting. (Advantages: detailed feedback on your own work; lots of opportunities to read and comment on colleagues' work, which is a great way of improving your own writing).
 - A group of colleagues meets every 2–3 weeks to discuss work-in-progress in rotating three-person 'pods'. Each participant submits one short piece of writing (5 pages maximum) and reads two colleagues' contributions. In a quick one-hour lunchtime session, every member of the group receives twenty minutes' worth of feedback from two peers and in turn delivers feedback on their work. (Advantages: frequent quick feedback; low stakes;

- opportunities to read and hear from a range of colleagues, as the make-up of the pods changes each time).
- A group of colleagues meets for coffee once a week to discuss their progress. The conversation is not about the work itself so much as the writing process: for example, how many words did you write this week? If you did not meet your goals last week, what got in the way? What are your goals for next week, and what changes do you plan to make to your way of working? (Advantages: A constant focus on examining and improving the conditions that enable productivity).
 - A pair of colleagues ('peer mentors') meets weekly, fortnightly or monthly to undertake any of the feedback exercises outlined above. The colleagues might exchange writing logs, comment on one another's work or simply provide each other with support and encouragement.
8. **Schedule occasional writing retreats.** Writing retreats – occasional periods of intense, shut-the-world-away productivity at a place other than your home or office – are no substitute for a daily writing routine, but they can provide a useful supplement. Group writing retreats can include discussions and workshops with colleagues as well as individual writing time (Grant, 2008). At solo retreats, academics with busy family or social lives often find themselves energised by the novelty of working at odd hours – for example, during meal times or late at night. In both cases, the physical displacement and the change of routine take the writer into new mental spaces.
9. **Take time out to reflect and plan.** Every few weeks, schedule an hour or so to brainstorm, mindmap, reflect, ruminate, take stock, discuss your writing with a colleague or friend – anything that will give you a new angle on your work and jar you out of your latest mental rut. You might want to keep a small book or diary especially for this purpose: a 'writing log' dedicated to recording your ideas, charting your progress and casting your eyes in new directions. Many writers find this kind of reflection is best undertaken with a cup of coffee or glass of wine in hand!
10. **Write every day...** even when you think you have nothing to write about. Writing is a generative process: the very act of setting pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) will help you think more clearly and creatively. Keep in mind that the success of your academic career depends on your ability to write effectively, engagingly and above all abundantly. Writing every day will help you achieve your goals.

References

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Author Notes

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