Monday, May 23, 2022

Finding Your Way Back To Writing

In this current moment, many of us are reflecting hard on what professor life is supposed to be about. Traditionally, when we've spoken to faculty about the day-to-day challenges of the job, they've spoken about it in terms of what they have to do. I *have to* publish x number of articles in three years. I *have to* get an external grant before my next annual review. I *have to* write my entire book manuscript over the summer. We fully acknowledge that there are marks and metrics professors have to hit in order to be reappointed, promoted, and tenured.

These past few weeks, we've talked about making a **summer plan** and curating **a writing community** to help anchor you for the summer. We've even talked about what **resistance to writing** might look like when implementing these strategies. But from experience, we know you can have all these things in place and know how resistance may manifest, and *still* have trouble getting pen to paper (or finger to keyboard). Before you know it, a week will pass, then two, and then a month later, there's still no progress on the writing.

This happens to the best of us. Trust. There's this vague sense that you SHOULD be writing, and you NEED to write (in order to finish your dissertation, get a job, earn tenure and promotion, etc.), but you're not channeling your energy in a way that actual writing gets done. As a result, lots of other work gets completed and other peoples' needs get met, but at the end of the day, your manuscript is left untouched. This "work-crastination" is a form of resistance! This type of resistance is grounded in relatively simple technical errors that writers frequently make in the early stages of their careers. The good news is that this type of resistance is the easiest to resolve. A few simple tips and tricks will get those sentences on the page.

What's Holding You Back?

We want to encourage you to reflect on your writing habits and gently ask yourself: What's holding me back from developing a daily writing routine? We like to start with people's writing habits first before moving into the psychological blocks (we'll be tackling those one-by-one over the course of the summer). This week, we want you to focus on your writing behaviors. Maybe you haven't set aside a specific time for your research and writing. Or you've set aside the wrong time to write. Or you just have no clue how much time particular writing tasks take, so you consistently underestimate the amount of time that writing requires. Or you imagine you have to do everything yourself, and therefore, very little actually gets done. Or the tasks you've set out for your writing time are too complex, so when you sit down to write you're spending all your energy trying to figure out what you're supposed to be doing (instead of doing it). Or you don't know what you need to do. Or you knew at one time, but you forgot because you think planning and list-making are for anal-retentive people, and you're more of a creative type.

We've all made these technical errors! Many early-career academic writers remain steeped in writing habits that were formed when they were undergraduates. Because student writing is largely driven by external deadlines, few of us developed consistent writing practices. Instead, we waited until shortly before a deadline, engaged in multi-day writing binges, and then avoided writing again until we faced another external deadline.

This week, we want to encourage you to observe your current writing behaviors for these common technical errors. If you identify one of them, consider trying one of the following strategies.

Error 1: You Haven't Set Aside A Specific Time For Your Writing

Block out at least 30 minutes in your calendar each day, Monday through Friday, and then show up at the appointed time. Treat it with the same level of respect you would a meeting with someone else. Start on time, end on time, turn your phone off, and only reschedule for an emergency.

Error 2: You've Set Aside The Wrong Time For Writing

Too many people treat their writing as an activity they "hope" to have time for at the end of the day after everyone else's needs have been met. If writing is the most important factor to your long-term success as a scholar, it should be given the best time of your day. If you're just starting to develop a daily writing routine, try writing first thing in the morning (even if you're not a morning person).

Error 3: You Have No Idea How Long Writing Tasks Take

The most common complaint we hear from academic writers is that everything takes far longer than expected. Keep track of your time, particularly for repetitive tasks. This will not only give you an accurate assessment of how long writing a proposal, constructing a table or reviewing the literature actually takes, but it will also help you to set realistic expectations for the future. By the way, when it comes to writing projects, they *always* take longer than we first estimate. Don't ever let shame about hitting a task by an arbitrary deadline get you down.

Error 4: You Think You Have To Do Everything Yourself

Ask yourself what tasks you must do and what tasks can be delegated to other people. Often there are many writing- and research-related tasks that can be delegated or outsourced to others (i.e., checking citations, proofreading, editing, etc.). If you don't have the research budget for that, do what Anthony does and barter favors ("I'll proof yours if you proof mine.").

Error 5: The Tasks You Have Set Out Are Too Complex

Take a piece of paper and a pencil and map out whatever it is you need to do. When we feel overwhelmed by a big task, we write the *big-overwhelming-goal* on the right side of the paper and a stick figure on the left side. Then we work our way backward from the overwhelming thing to myself by asking: What are the steps that need to be accomplished to complete this? We keep breaking it down into smaller and smaller steps until we've reached the tasks we can do today. It will also help you to uncover if there are aspects of a project that you don't know how to do so that you can pinpoint areas where you will need to seek assistance.

Error 6: You Can't Remember What You Have To Do

Make a list. Get all of the things you need to do out of your head and onto a piece of paper in one place. It doesn't have to be anything fancy, electronic, or synced with some gadget or gizmo; a notecard, post-it note, or your paper planner will do fine to capture all of your to-do tasks. Start the week with a 30-minute **planning meeting** when you determine what needs to be done that week and then place each of those items in a specific time block on your calendar. If they don't all fit (and they won't), then figure out how to delegate, delete, or renegotiate the deadlines on the least important items.

Each of the strategies can be super-charged by attaching **support and accountability**. For example, daily writing is easier when you have a writing buddy or accountability partner. Once you learn and implement a few new writing strategies, you will either be off to the races with your writing or your resistance will resurface in new and more frightening ways. More on that next week!

The Weekly Challenge

This week, we challenge you to:

- Write every day for at least 30 minutes.
- Identify what (if any) technical errors are holding you back from writing each day.
- Experiment by trying one new strategy this week.
- If you feel reactive to trying new strategies to increase your writing time, ask yourself: What beliefs are keeping me from experimentation?
- If additional **resistance** emerges, welcome it with curiosity, engage it in conversation, and identify the behaviors and the feelings associated with it (you may find keeping a resistance log helpful).

We hope this week brings you a spirit of curiosity about your writing habits, a willingness to try new techniques, and the increased engagement that comes with spending time each day with your summer writing project.

Warmly,

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