

Seven Suggestions for Becoming a More Productive Writer

BY MANO SINGHAM

Samuel Johnson's oft-quoted saying that "no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money" supports the widespread belief that writing is so intrinsically unrewarding that it requires a powerful external incentive to overcome one's reluctance to get on with it. Most academics do not face the strong and immediate pressure to write in order to get money to buy this week's groceries or pay next month's rent. And yet most—from junior faculty struggling to win tenure to presidents writing letters to their boards—must write in order to reap the profession's rewards.

Most of us like the idea of writing *in the abstract*, provided the act itself is set some time comfortably in the future—say the next day or week or during breaks in the academic year. We also like *having* written. What most of us find extremely distasteful and try to avoid at all costs is sitting down *right now* and starting to write. When confronted with having to do so, other tasks such as arranging one's desk, having another cup of coffee, checking the news, even sorting paper clips suddenly become extraordinarily attractive.

For most of us, the problem with writing is actually starting. Like the law of friction—that it is much harder to get something to start moving than it is to keep it moving—starting to write is difficult, but it is easier to continue once we have started. Hence the secret to productive writing is to develop strategies to overcome that initial barrier. What follows are some suggestions for doing so.

But first, a caveat: Writing, like most creative endeavors, is highly idiosyncratic. So any attempt to prescribe the ingredients of successful writing is likely to evoke protests over acts of omission and commission, in addition to calling into question the author's

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credentials to pontificate on such a topic in the first place. Despite that risk, I have decided to distill what I have learned about writing by studying the literature, by reading about the writing habits of successful writers, and by drawing from my own experience.

#1: The first rule is to *write regularly every day*. There are a few people who are successful at binge writing, setting aside large blocks of time to devote themselves to almost nothing else. But as Robert Boice points out, most people become far more productive when they write daily, even for short times.

The best way to do this is to *set yourself a realistic daily quota of writing*. The quota could be measured in terms of time (mine is 90 minutes of writing time), but it could also be a page or word quota. The prolific George Bernard Shaw, for example, wrote a minimum of five pages each day, regardless of whatever else was going on in his life.

Writing a little every day is better than waiting for big chunks of writing time to materialize in the future, because those almost invariably disappear like mirages as the time approaches, driven out by the routine accumulations of life's obligations. In a study where people were asked to estimate whether in the future they would have more money and free time than they had at present, most did not expect to have more money but did expect to have more free time. When it comes to money we are realistic enough to know that fresh sources of income are unlikely to suddenly materialize. But when it comes to future time, we seem not to have digested the fact that although our calendars for next month seem wonderfully open now, they will fill up the same way that our calendar for today did.

Another reason that it is important to write regularly is that the act of writing generates new ideas, while not writing them down causes the ideas in our mind to evaporate and disappear. There is a dialectic relationship between the words on paper (or the screen) and our thoughts. As E. M. Forster once said, "How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?"

There are many obstacles to achieving this daily writing goal. Life and work certainly intrude. But many of these obstacles are of our own making and can be overcome with some self-discipline. For example, email and the Internet can become enormous time sinks. I used to start each day by checking my email and reading the news, in print or on the screen. My writing was adversely affected in three ways: Those activities took much longer than I anticipated; the information in them dominated my thinking for the rest of the day; and I would follow others' agendas instead of my own.

With considerable effort I have weaned myself away from logging on until after I have completed my quota of writing. I have persuaded myself to think of email and surfing the Web

(and even humdrum chores like filing papers, cutting grass, or doing the laundry) as rewards for having done my daily quota of writing.

Getting your quota done early in the day brings many psychological benefits. It makes you feel smugly virtuous and sets a good mood for the rest of the day. I also find that once I get started writing, I often continue even after my quota is reached (although see Rule #5 below).

Furthermore, the act of writing generates so many new ideas that you become impatient to get back to them. This makes you much more efficient about completing routine tasks so that you can return to your writing. Now I often find myself doing multiple blocks of writing each day, so the creative energies that I start each day with are lavished on my writing and not on email correspondence.

#2: It is important to *strike a good balance between reading and writing*. A physicist colleague once suggested that you can either read or write papers; you cannot do both. He was joking of course, but there is a kernel of truth there. We need to read to be able to keep up with the scholarly literature and also to benefit from seeing how good writers put their ideas into words. But we can easily use reading as a way of avoiding writing. Endlessly collecting information suppresses the guilt that comes with not writing, because we feel that we are still doing scholarly work.

This pitfall can be avoided by producing some writing output for everything we read. I now tell myself that if reading something involves a substantial investment of my time, I have to create notes identifying what justified it and how I might be able to use it in my own work. It could be an idea, some data, an argument, a story, a criticism—anything. It is amazing how this can result in new ideas and new prose. A lot of these notes form

the foundation for new writing projects, with ready-made text available from which to start.

#3: It is a truism that good writers rewrite and rewrite and then rewrite some more. Getting in the habit of critiquing, editing, and polishing our work is essential if we are to get better output. But in order to work up the enthusiasm to revise, it is important to *learn to like what you write* so that you look forward to reading your earlier drafts. I am surprised at the number of published scholars I know who say that they so dislike reading their own writing later that they even hate to look over the publishers' proofs. It is only when you like your own writing that you want to make it even better and enjoy polishing it.

One reason we may dislike reading our own work is that we're often disappointed that the rich stew of ideas that we savored in our minds looks like a thin gruel when first written down. This can cause us to lose confidence in our ideas and

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worry that we have deluded ourselves into thinking that we have something new or interesting to say. But the work of cognitive scientists like Jerry Fodor and Steven Pinker suggests that this phenomenon may be a consequence of how our minds work.

Contrary to popular belief, we do not usually think in the words and sentences of ordinary language. What we manipulate in our minds are *symbols* for concepts (known as ‘mentalese’), and writing our ideas down is an act of translation from that symbolic language. But while mentalese contains our thoughts in the form of a complex tapestry, writing necessarily is linear and can only be created one thread at a time. Hence it should not be surprising that our first attempt at expressing ideas should look so, well, threadbare. It is only by repeatedly rewriting that we create new threads and interweave them to approach the level of complexity that the ideas originally formed in our minds.

When writers preemptively criticize their own writing, as if they are imagining some exacting and harsh critic (often someone they know) looking over their shoulder as they write, they are so concerned about what this critic might say that they get stuck before they even start. Peter Elbow makes an excellent suggestion to deal with this problem: When writing we should have two different mindsets. One is an *accepting* mode in which every idea, as well as the words we use to express it, is seen as wonderful and original and worth putting down. It is only during rewrites that we should switch to a *critical* mode, examining what we enthusiastically wrote in the accepting mode and checking for weaknesses, flaws, consistency, originality, style, tone, and word choice.

#4: Another tip to help begin writing is, *do not start with a blank page but always be continuing something*. It is a film cliché is to show a writer starting a new work by putting a blank sheet of paper into the typewriter and then staring at it with growing frustration. But that’s not how it has to work.

Blank pages are intimidating. To avoid them, I always start with something I have already written. It is easier to build on existing writing than to begin something totally new, and just reading what I have written acts as a stimulus to further writing. I will often start a new writing project with a chunk of something I have written previously or with notes on my reading. The advantage is that I already have some text to work with, and the blank-page nightmare is avoided.

#5: Then there are those exhilarating days when writing seems easy and you don’t want to stop. But even when the words flow out like a gusher, *don’t write so much that you end up exhausted*. Doing so may make you feel good for the moment but makes it hard to start again the next day when you cannot recapture the muse.

I even recommend that you not continue writing until you reach a good stopping point, but rather end abruptly and leave the writing dangling. This may seem counterintuitive, but when you stop in the middle of an idea or section or even a sentence, that suspended thought stays in the forefront of your mind, gnawing at you, so that you cannot wait to begin writing again in order to complete the thought. Even when I am just rewriting or editing, I often stop in the middle of something rather than working through to the end, although it may take only a few minutes more to do so.

I used to think that George Bernard Shaw’s habit of stopping after completing his daily quota of exactly five pages, even if he were in the middle of a sentence, was simply a sign of his eccentricity. But I now realize that he was being canny. A big obstacle to starting to write is not knowing what you are going to do first. Stopping at a point where you know exactly what needs to be written when you next sit down is an excellent strategy for overcoming that barrier.

#6: It is helpful to *have many different writing projects at different stages of completion* (such as new text, re-writes, editing, note making, evidence collecting, polishing) going on simultaneously. If you have work at various stages, you can always find something congenial to do for any level of tiredness or creativity. Once you start writing, it is easy to shift to those things that require greater effort. Even if you have just one writing project going on, you can start by doing different things with it, depending on your mood. I often start writing by completing any thought left dangling or doing some editing, rewriting, or polishing of older material, and then shift to creating new prose.

#7: On uncreative days, it is best to *start with what you can write about, not with what you need to write*. For example, make notes on something you have read, which is always fairly easy to do and usually generates new ideas and connections, because you immediately start thinking in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of the author’s ideas in relation to yours. Before you know it, what started as notes on someone else’s work has blossomed into your own original ideas and text.

But suppose that you absolutely have to get working on something distasteful, like a grant proposal that you have been procrastinating over. Start with the part of it that is most congenial to you or the most mindlessly routine, like creating headings, inserting boilerplate material, or making rough notes for each section (you should be in the accepting mode of mind when doing this). Once you have written something, anything, it becomes much easier to add to and improve upon it.

Even amongst those who feel they have something new and interesting to say, there is a gulf between those who want to write and those who actually do. The former tend to think that having well-thought-out ideas and the proper mood are necessary preconditions for writing. The latter realize that if you simply start writing something, the fleshed-out ideas, and even the mood, emerge from the process. My suggestions are meant to help people who want to write transform that desire into actual writing. ☐

RESOURCES

- Robert Boice, *Advice for New Faculty Members*, Allyn and Bacon, Needham Heights, MA, 2000
- Peter Elbow, *Everyone Can Write*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2000
- Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, W. W. Norton, New York, NY, 1997 ☞