

PRACTICE BECOMING A PRODUCTIVE ACADEMIC WRITER

PART

I

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2

ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN THE “WRITE” HABIT

We are what we repeatedly do.
Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.

—Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.)

THINK ABOUT IT...

If I asked you to complete this sentence, what would you say?

The most important tool for success as an academic is _____.

When I invite students in my classes to go through this sentence-completion exercise, they quickly come up with “critical thinking,” “research skills,” or “statistics” as their answer. Because they are in a writing productivity class, however, they suspect I’m going to say something like “writing,” so some volunteer answers such as “publications” or “articles published in professional journals.” But rarely do they point to *writing*, itself, as the most important tool.

I’m not sure why they don’t come up with *writing* as their answer. Do they believe that writing is a by-product of research or teaching? That writing is merely a necessary evil, something one “gets to” only when there’s an assignment to complete, if there’s enough spare time? That what matters most are the completed papers, the published products, not the process itself? That writing cannot contribute to learning and to personal or professional growth?

I also ask graduate students and faculty who attend my workshops to share how they reply to the question “What do you do for a living?” I probe to see how many will say “I am a writer; I write for a living.” Curiously, few, if any, ever identify themselves as professional writers.

With these two reflexive exercises, I come to my point, to the single take-home message I want them to remember if they happen to learn nothing else in my classes or workshops: *They are writers*. They write for a living. Every dimension of their future success as academics—grades, promotions, presentations to professional groups, funding for research projects—will depend on how well (and, yes, *how much*) they write. Aside from trade book authors, no other professional group depends so much on writing for its survival. Academics (here, I’m thinking of faculty, students, research staff, and administrators) are professional writers, whether they identify themselves as such or not, whether they like it or not.

Therefore, the single most important take-home message I want *you* to remember is this: *You are a professional writer*. If you are a college student, a graduate student, faculty, research staff, or an administrator, you write for a living. You may not make as much money from book sales as modern-day authors such as Stephen King, John Grisham, or Patricia Cornwell. After all, they have published at least one best seller a year, over many years, in the United States. Yet, as with these famous writers, your salary and your success will largely depend on how much and how well you write. No doubt about it, *academics write for a living*. Therefore, *you* write for a living, whether you like it or not, whether you want to or not.

Writing term papers, reports, reviews, journal articles, book chapters, research grants, books, or textbooks defines much of students' and faculty's lives in colleges and universities worldwide. Yet as you read in Chapter 1, research data suggest faculty write and publish at lower-than-expected levels, while students struggle to respond to their professors' expectations for their writing.

In part, the low productivity and struggles with writing have to do with how academics view themselves and their work. If they do not see themselves as *writers*, their writing becomes relegated to whenever they have *enough time*. "Enough time" never happens spontaneously, so they seldom write. Even though writing represents *the* most important tool in the academician's toolbox for professional advancement, we (yes, I, too, have been guilty of this) treat it much as we do our gardening tools: shoved to the back of the toolshed or garage; stored among the other dusty, rusty tools; and used only sporadically, when absolutely necessary. As many of you who love to have the right tool for the right job already know, certain equipment—when used infrequently—deteriorates and loses its efficiency.

SEEING YOURSELF AS A WRITER

The exercises in this book, therefore, were designed to help you develop *a new perspective of yourself as a writer*. Developing a professional identity (as a writer or otherwise) takes time and requires *intention*. Identity Theory (Burke & Stets, 2009) explains that we grow our professional identities by interacting with others who have a similar role, as well as by being aware of the cultural and social norms that mold that identity. Our own expectations or perceptions of that role also affect how we identify ourselves. Therefore, your identity as a writer will gradually develop as you interact with other writers, and as you understand the variables—both external and within you—that shape perceptions of yourself as a writer. If you are a female Asian-American writer in a STEM field, for instance, your academic writer identity will be shaped by views and experiences that will be different from those of a Black male writer in the humanities. Cultural/geographic background, past experience, and intellectual environment, all will contribute to shape your identity as a writer. So developing your writer identity will come with time, but you can contribute to shaping a healthier identity if you are

aware of the factors that do, indeed, mold it (and trust me: your writer-identity has almost nothing to do with whether you are a *published* author).

Even if you don’t see yourself as a writer, *yet* practicing new habits and strategies will help you develop this new perspective and, over time, *grow into* this new identity. To develop this new perspective or this new identity, then, you’ll need to take three steps:

Step 1: Embrace the “write” attitude.

Step 2: Manage the contingencies.

Step 3: Practice.

Step 1: Embrace the “Write” Attitude

The first action step you must take to develop a healthy and sustainable writing habit is to adopt the appropriate or right (or write) attitude.

What is an attitude, then? And which attitude is the most appropriate? The simplest definition of attitude regards it as the judgment human beings make of everything around them (their environment, other people, situations, and themselves) as good or bad, favorable or unfavorable, positive or negative, pleasurable or displeasing, likeable or unlikable (Albarracín et al., 2005, p. 3).

While scholars disagree about how many dimensions an attitude has, for our purposes we’ll adopt the simplest construction: An attitude comprises two important dimensions—a belief and a value. The formula is straight-forward: A strong, favorable belief, combined with a high value, produces a strong, positive attitude. Put simply, if you believe developing a healthy, sustainable, low-stress writing habit will lead to better-quality writing and more steady production, then you have a positive belief about developing a writing habit. If writing well and producing more steadily without increased stress are important to you, then what you believe in has a high value. When combined—the belief together with the value—they form an attitude. When the belief is positive and the value is high, the attitude is strong and favorable. When the belief is negative and the value is low, you have a negative attitude.

The most appropriate and helpful attitude you can embrace as an academic writer is this one: (a) *believing* that developing a healthy writing habit *can*, in fact, lead to improvements in the quality of your writing and to low-stress productivity *and* (b) *valuing* improvement and low-stress productivity.

If you admit not having this attitude, right now ... well, good for you! You’re being honest, and honesty is very important for writing with integrity. But don’t lose heart. Attitudes take time to develop, as they are influenced or shaped by everyday experience, practice, and reinforcement. Therefore, if you don’t have a positive attitude this very minute, I invite you to follow along with the book and see if your attitude improves. The exercises I propose in the text are designed to shape your writing

experience positively, to provide opportunities for practice, and to facilitate obtaining reinforcement. Engaging in these practices will help you develop a more favorable attitude toward writing and grow into your new identity as a professional writer. If you do, however, have a positive attitude right now, then you're already on the road to better writing and increased productivity. Welcome!

Step 2: Manage the Contingencies

Embracing the “write” attitude, however, is only the first step you need to take to establish and sustain a healthy writing habit. The research on academics' writing productivity points to the need for *managing contingencies*, too (Boice, 1983, 1997). Managing contingencies means handling and controlling the factors that either facilitate or hinder your ability to write productively.

Contingencies are the circumstances and events surrounding you, which affect your writing habit. For example, checking your e-mail or Instagram is a contingency (Carr, 2011). If you check them too frequently, you may become too distracted and unable to focus on your writing tasks (Newport, 2016). By scheduling a specific writing time in your schedule/planner and turning off your e-mail or Internet access, you will be managing an important distraction. You will be paying attention exclusively to the writing during your writing sessions, distraction-free. You will be managing some of your contingencies.

RESEARCH SHOWS...

Ahmed and Güss (2022), in their study of factors that cause writer's block, classified those already reported in the literature into four broad categories: affective/physiological, motivational, cognitive, and behavioral. The authors surveyed 146 fiction and nonfiction writers (both professionals and semiprofessionals). Survey participants (mostly women) had an average of 12 years of writing experience (range: <1 year–37 years). The authors asked participants to refer to their experience(s) with writer's block, and also to provide three solutions to writer's block (ranking them according to effectiveness). Nearly half the sample (42%) claimed affective/physiological factors (e.g., “stress, anxiety, intense emotions”) had caused their writer's block, followed by motivational factors (e.g., “fear of criticism/rejection, performance anxiety”), cognitive factors (such as “perfectionism”), and less commonly, behavioral factors (such as “procrastination” or “being too busy”—only 11% of respondents chose this category). Among the proposed solutions, participants rated as most effective: “Take a break from writing”, followed by “Discuss ideas with others” and “Keep writing.” This study confirms the pervasiveness of writer's block and that simple and inexpensive attitudinal (Step 1 in this chapter), contingency-management (Step 2 in this chapter), and practice-related solutions (Step 3 in this chapter) are, still, the most helpful!

Step 3: Practice

In addition to adopting a favorable attitude and managing your contingencies, you will need to take one last step: Practice your writing. The research done on musicians and athletes suggests one of the most important elements distinguishing elite performers from mediocre ones is the time spent on *deliberate* (or *deep*) *practice*. (For some interesting descriptions of deep practice, see Daniel Coyle’s [2009] *The Talent Code*, Geoff Colvin’s [2010] *Talent Is Overrated*, and K. Anders Ericsson’s research [2007, 2008; Ericsson et al., 2009], mentioned in Chapter 1.)

Deliberate practice means targeted, focused repetition of specific behaviors—accompanied by persistent correcting of mistakes—for the purpose of improving performance (again, see Chapter 1 for more on *deep* or *deliberate practice*; see also Cleary & Zimmerman, 2001; Kitsantas & Zimmerman, 2006; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 1999).

The key to optimizing *deep practice* is to s-l-o-w d-o-w-n during practice. Slowing down forces the one practicing to pay attention to mistakes, identify them, and correct them immediately (if they know how to, or later, if they need to learn how to handle that mistake/problem). The exercises in this book are designed to help you practice writing by slowing down, paying attention to your unique patterns of mistakes, and developing a system for getting feedback to correct those mistakes.

Contrary to popular belief, *practicing our writing* requires more than sitting down and “just doing it”—just writing, writing, writing. Practice entails repeating an action with a defined goal, a specific strategy, and a mechanism for correcting mistakes. Practice—especially deep practice—entails more than mere repetition. Deep practice involves setting goals, slowing down, identifying as many mistakes (or elements that can be improved) as possible, and correcting them. The exercises in this book will help you precisely with these: setting goals, slowing down, strategizing repetitions, catching, and correcting mistakes.

Rarely do we think about approaching our academic writing from a perspective of *practice*. When was the last time someone told you they couldn’t meet with you because they had a writing practice session scheduled for that time? As you work through this book, you will learn to respect and protect your writing time much as Olympian athletes protect their practice schedules.

This book is anchored, therefore, in the well-established reputation of deep practice for expert performance in many areas, and it will attempt to shift your attitude to one that values *practicing your writing* (see Chapter 1 for further details on the empirical and theoretical basis grounding this notion). In sum, the exercises I propose were designed to help you *develop the “write” attitude, manage your contingencies, and practice your writing*. Let’s begin!

EXERCISE 1—SCHEDULE YOUR WRITING SESSIONS

TIME NEEDED: 15 minutes in the first session; 05 minutes thereafter

MATERIALS NEEDED: Your weekly/daily planner; a timer

This week's exercise will establish the foundation for all other exercises in the book. Scheduling your writing sessions is the single best contingency-management strategy you can adopt. Research examining productive faculty's habits consistently points to scheduled and protected writing time as a key element for success. One example is the study Michael C. Mayrath (2008) conducted with 22 of the most productive faculty in educational psychology. The question posed to the faculty was "If you were going to explain why you were so productive, what would you say?" (p. 46). Among the answers participants gave, "scheduled time to write" emerged prominently:

Karen Harris [one of the participants in the study] said she was taught a "calendar trick by a very productive researcher" when she was an assistant professor. The trick is that "research and writing time belong on your calendar." She said an author must write in [the calendar] time to write and do research, and that you must protect this time just as if it were a meeting that you could not reschedule. (p. 52)

Yet not everyone agrees that writing daily, or regularly, is necessary for sustained productivity. Helen Sword's (2017) study of 100 prolific authors, world-wide, for example, revealed substantial diversity in academics' writing habits. Sword (2017) says, "Successful writers carve out time and space for their writing *in a striking variety of ways*, but they all do it somehow" (p. 4—emphasis mine). In her study, some writers followed structured routines of daily writing, some did not; some were intentional about making time to write regularly, others wrote "all the time." Some wrote only after they had thought about what to write, others wrote to think. Nonetheless, they were all successful, prolific academic writers. Sword's inevitable conclusion, then, was: "... the more I looked for consistent behavioral patterns among the writers I spoke to, the more I was struck by the richness of their difference" (p. 3).

I would argue, however, that making writing a habit, a part of one's daily routine, can be very useful for many struggling writers who don't know where to begin. Having a designated, scheduled time to write, daily, tends to mitigate the emotional energy spent in moving through the day wondering, "When will I get to my writing?" or "I'm reading this book, but I should really be writing", or "It's already 8pm and I haven't done any writing, yet." The emotional energy we expend wondering about our writing could be better used to craft our texts, instead. Making writing a routine that happens

without much effort involved in its planning can be a great way to reduce some of the unnecessary stress we add to the writing task.

And I would add: If the strategy is essential for many extremely successful scholars, might it be helpful for us, too? Especially if you’re trying to create a writing habit, I would recommend you stick with writing daily (or as regularly as possible), until the habit is established.

Therefore, take 10 minutes, right now, and examine your weekly/daily planner. Then do the following:

1. Schedule your writing sessions for this week. Schedule one session *every day*. Yes! Every day! (I recommend at least 1 day off per week, however.) And, if your schedule allows, schedule each session at the *same time* every day (try your best to make this happen).

If your weekly schedule does not allow you to write every day, try looking for some sort of *pattern* or *rhythm* to structure your writing sessions. Maybe do it every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday; or Tuesday and Thursday mornings, and Friday and Saturday afternoons. See if you can create some sort of rhythm to your week, so you know when you’ll be doing your writing. What works best, however, is regularity of some sort. Writing on a Monday morning and then only returning to your writing late Friday afternoon, then skipping next Monday and trying to fit in something the following Thursday... well... the absence of a pattern, of uniform intervals between practice sessions, of consistency, will make it much harder to develop a writing *habit*.

2. Start with *15-minute sessions* if you’re not used to writing regularly. Plan for 30-minute sessions if you’re more used to writing routinely. I am certain you can find a block of 15 minutes, every day, somewhere in your busy schedule. If you cannot, try finding 5 minutes before another regular habit in your day. For instance, write for 5 minutes before having breakfast, then 5 minutes before lunch, and 5 minutes before dinner. Stacking the writing habit with another routine you already have mastered can make establishing the writing habit a lot easier in the beginning.
3. After scheduling the days/times you will be writing this week, spend the remaining 5 minutes listing what pops into your head when you try to answer the following question (just write a bulleted list, as the ideas come to mind):

What does it take to get me to write (to begin and/or to continue)?

Write as quickly as you can. Don’t worry about editing or capturing your thoughts in complete sentences; single words will do:

4. In each writing session this week, use 5 of your scheduled 15 minutes (or 30 minutes) to answer these other questions (one question per writing session):
 - a. What keeps me away from writing?
 - b. What aspects of writing do I really enjoy?
 - c. What aspects of writing do I especially dislike?
 - d. How have I been treating my most important academic tool? Is it rusting away; out of reach or sight; needing repair, polishing, or sharpening? Or is it always right here, in a clean, airy place, fully functional and ready when I need it? In other words, how much time and how many resources have I dedicated lately to improving my writing?
 - e. Do I see myself as a writer? If the answer is *yes*, in what ways do I “wear” my identity as an academic writer; in other words, how do *others* see that I am an academic writer? If the answer is *no*, what keeps me from viewing myself as an academic writer? Do I have a *fixed* or a *growth* mindset related to my academic writing (Dweck, 2008)?

After you’ve done Exercise 1, keep your writing schedule for this week. During each session, however, write (or don’t write) as you normally would. If you feel you have nothing to write about, read a journal article and note your thoughts as you write. If you’re really having difficulty figuring out what to write, practice copying a text—yes, copying (more on the benefits of copying in Exercise 15, Chapter 4). Or write about your experiences with developing a writing habit, or write a letter. I doubt—because you’re an academic—you will struggle to find *something* to write about. This week, the purpose is to begin developing a writing habit; the goal, to get used to showing up for your writing sessions. *What* you write about right now is not as important as training your body and your mind to follow a specific routine, to *show up* for your writing practice. Remember: Athletes, musicians, and other world-class performers spend much of their time in practice sessions. Regularly. Consistently. Why shouldn’t *you*?

After the first week, revisit your planned schedule and make any necessary changes. Eventually, you will learn which time slots work best for you, depending on your routine and your demands.

Being an academic myself, I realize you may be asking, “But when will I find time to practice writing within my already packed schedule?” Once, when I was asking the same question, I came across this brilliant quote in Johnson and Mullen’s (2007) *Write to the Top!*:

Prolific academics *create* writing time *where none exists* and then carefully *protect* it from intrusion. (p. 8; emphases added)

Notice the difference here? *Create* versus *find*. None of us can ever find time because we look for *extra* time—those minutes left over, unclaimed, after everything else is addressed. Such time rarely, if ever, can be found! Yet all of us can purposefully *create* and *protect* time to write. I suggest you print the quote and post it next to your workstation as a reminder of what you’re practicing this week. Try it. It works!

POWER IN PRACTICE...

I was first introduced to the ideas in this chapter as a graduate student. At that time, I learned and established the habit of being intentional about scheduling my writing sessions and not waiting to feel motivated or inspired to write. Learning this habit helped me complete my dissertation, on time and successfully. I often revisit this book especially now, as I mentor students, and it occurred to me during a recent rereading that there is a reason this chapter emphasizes both the need to *establish* and *maintain* a “write habit.” *Maintaining* that habit, through developing the appropriate attitude towards writing, planning for, and managing contingencies (which plague a lot of academics), is key. It has made a world of difference for me as a researcher, especially when I worked at a teaching-intensive institution. Being intentional and consistent about scheduling my writing as the first task of the day keeps me consistently productive. It is my not-so-secret secret to sustained productivity!

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EXERCISE 2—INCREASE YOUR WRITING TIME IN NO TIME

TIME NEEDED: 05 minutes x session

MATERIALS NEEDED: Timer

In Exercise 2, you will be adding 1 minute of writing time to your regular writing sessions, one session at a time, like this:

Session 1: your regular writing time + 1 minute

Session 2: your regular writing time + 2 minutes

Session 3: your regular writing time + 3 minutes

And so on.

The goal is to increase the time you spend on your scheduled writing sessions by 50%–100%. If you began with 15 minutes, you'll build up to 30 minutes in 15 days; if you began with 30 minutes, you'll build up to 45 minutes. For this to happen, you will need to continue adding 1 minute for at least 15 sessions. If you practice the exercise for 1 week only, you can add an average 5 minutes to your regular writing time. It's up to you how much you want to increase your writing time, overall.

After setting your timer for the extra minute, spend the first 5 minutes of each writing session during the week examining the lists you generated last week (Exercise 1). Identify three factors that facilitate your writing (that motivate you to start writing, make writing enjoyable for you, or keep you writing once you begin) and three factors that keep you away from writing.

This week, develop *one strategy* to handle each factor hindering your writing. For example, if you're always tempted to check your e-mail during a writing session, or if you feel you can't begin to write before you check your e-mail, try turning it off when start to write. Allow yourself to check it only *after* you've completed your writing session for the day. Use the e-mail checking as a reward for having written that day.

Once you've developed three new strategies to deal with the obstacles to writing, focus on the factors that facilitate your writing: What's working really well? Can more of what's working be added to your writing routine? How can you make what's already working well work even better?

Focus on one strategy at a time. No sense in adding several at once, and getting lost. Test your strategies, and adapt or modify them as needed. Make them work for you. In my case, avoiding interruptions while I write is very important. When I first began managing these interruptions, I tried closing my office door during my writing sessions and placing signs on

the door asking people not to disturb me because I was writing: “Interrupt at your own risk! I’m writing!” I’ve now settled into arriving at my office early in the mornings, when no one is around to interrupt (I aim for 7:00 a.m., most days). How did I get used to arriving earlier at the office? By setting my alarm clock 1 minute earlier every day for a month. After a month, I was getting up half an hour before I used to, without even noticing the difference!

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EXERCISE 3—WARM-UP: READ ABOUT WRITING

TIME NEEDED: 10 minutes x session

MATERIALS NEEDED: Timer; a book about writing

With physical exercise, it's always a good idea to warm up your muscles, before beginning the heavy weight-lifting, right? The same goes for our writing practice: always a good idea to start your writing sessions (especially the first one of the day) with some warm-up exercises. One of my preferred warm-ups is to read something motivating, about writing itself.

Writers know that reading good writing is an important ingredient in the recipe for writing well. Yet, invariably, when I raise this issue with my students, they retort: “And what, exactly, constitutes ‘good’ writing?” This is always a difficult question to address, apart from personal preferences for certain writing styles. My answer, however, has consistently pointed to three elements. First, good writing is the kind of writing we *want* to read, the kind that grabs us, speaks to us, and has us saying, deep in our hearts, “Oh, I wish I had written *that!*” (Rosenblatt, 2011). Second, good writing is well-crafted, or writing in which the author was thoughtful and thorough: Words were carefully chosen; images were brilliantly drawn; connections were made in surprising and unexpected ways—all of it resulting in a new and refreshing approach to a topic.

Some would claim such artistry is more often found in fiction writing or literature, rarely in academic writing. Academic writing appears to have little room for creativity and is very formulaic or rigid regarding word choice and text structure. Yes, it is true. Academic writing follows rigorous standards because it cannot afford to be ambiguous or vague or imprecise. Poetry, on the other hand, does nothing *but* be ambiguous, intentionally. Yet being rigorous does not preclude writing with care, paying attention, and, when possible, using some surprising or unexpected images, arrangements of ideas, or special words (or even creating new ones once in a while!). Put simply: Just because it's academic doesn't mean the text must lack style! (For an enlightening treatment of this topic, see Helen Sword's (2012) book, *Stylish Academic Writing*.)

Finally, good writing is the kind that inspires us to carry on our own writing! Here, I'm thinking specifically of books or blogs *about writing* that discuss the craft, its struggles, and its joys: texts that teach us a trick or two about writing better or writing more. For this week's exercise, I'll focus on this latter type of good writing.

So, this week, we'll focus on practicing a brief warm-up before actually doing our writing. For this, you will need to:

1. Identify a book or a blog about writing that you want to read (As a suggestion, check out my other writing book: Goodson et al., 2020).
2. Read that book or those blog entries for 10 minutes, at the beginning of your writing sessions. Use your timer, and do not exceed the 10-minute limit. Be careful not to turn your writing session into a reading session.
3. If in your reading you find an idea or suggestion you think will be useful (or at least worth trying), note the idea in writing. (You may want to start a writing journal, someplace you can make notes to yourself about your reading, writing, and exercises.) Incorporate that particular suggestion in today’s writing session, if possible.

Good books *about* writing abound in the market today, and I’ve lost track of how many blogs focusing on the topic of writing inhabit (some would say “pollute”) the internet! You’ll find several types of books and blogs from which to choose: famous writers’ memoirs or biographies, detailing their writing lives and the strategies they use to write; entire writing workshops and models for writing; tips on grammar, punctuation, spelling, and editing; warm-up exercises for writers; materials covering how to write particular products, such as book proposals, textbooks, journal articles, or grant proposals for funding; and books/blogs on how to write for therapeutic purposes (to deal with personal trauma, for instance) or for personal growth.

Pick a book. Any book. Choose a blog. Subscribe to it. At the end of *this* book I provide a list of books and sites I highly recommend. Choose one. If you can ask for someone’s recommendation, even better. If you choose a book and you don’t like it in the first few pages, stop. Get another one. Same goes for the blogs. Don’t waste precious time reading material that doesn’t help, motivate, or touch you. Life is way too short to read all the good writing available; don’t waste time reading what doesn’t help.

Continue reading a bit every day (or every writing session), until you finish one book. Then either take a break from reading or start another one. The advice contained in the books, coupled with the sheer motivation to keep on writing, will be worth the 10-minute investment you’ll make. I guarantee.

On a final note: C. S. Lewis, author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, once said we read to learn we are not alone. Because writing can be a very lonely task, reading about writing will remind us we are not alone. As you read other authors’ reflections on the “writing life” (Dillard, 1989), you will find yourself comforted and supported by people who have struggled with the same issues you are facing now. Who knows, maybe someday you’ll be writing your own book, telling the world your own story of wrestling with writing—and overcoming!

EXERCISE 4—WRITE QUICKLY, EDIT SLOWLY

TIME NEEDED: 10 minutes x session

MATERIALS NEEDED: Timer

This week’s exercise will allow you to practice an important principle for productive writing: *separating the generating from the editing*. Generating a written text requires creativity and involves activating specific mechanisms in our brains. Editing text, on the other hand, is an analytical and repetitive action, requiring attention to detail. Editing invokes brain mechanisms distinct from those used in creative tasks (Kellog, 2018). The brain is an amazingly complex system, capable of handling myriad intricate jobs (Medina, 2008). Even so, it doesn’t perform very well when trying to handle two tasks requiring focused attention, such as *generating* and *editing*, simultaneously (so much for the notion of multitasking! See Newport, 2016).

Many people complain of writer’s block because they attempt to generate and edit at the same time. They want the first sentence they write to be *the perfect sentence!* And so they wait ... and sit ... and stare at their screens ... hoping for the one perfect sentence to bubble up, somehow, from a fountain of wisdom buried deep, somewhere. It rarely—if ever—happens. They continue to wait, sit, and stare, sometimes for hours! Frustration then settles in; the fixed mindset/belief “*I can’t write!*” takes over. Peter Elbow (1998)—the writing theoretician I mentioned in Chapter 1—calls this “the dangerous method: trying to write it right the first time” (p. 39).

Writers who heed Elbow’s warning and separate generating from editing prevent much danger. They write more and don’t experience writer’s block, compared with those who try to tackle both editing and generating at the same time. Therefore, the exercise for this week aims at having you practice separating generative writing (the capturing of words, thoughts, and ideas) from editing.

So ... begin by setting your timer for 5 minutes. For these first 5 minutes, write all the thoughts tumbling in your mind. The requirement, here, is the following: Write *as fast as you can*, without stopping. Don’t allow your fingers to stop typing at any time; don’t lift your pen/pencil from the writing pad at all for the entire 5 minutes.

If you write on a computer, you may want to minimize your file so you don’t see what you are typing and don’t feel tempted to backtrack in order to correct misspellings, change words, redo punctuation. These small tasks will derail your thoughts and cause you to switch between the two tasks—the generating and the editing—and this switch has a *cost* (Mayr & Kliegl, 2000): It takes longer. You want to avoid this, completely.

You may write about anything on your mind at the moment, or you may write all the thoughts you’ve been accumulating related to your current writing project. The

principle, here, is to generate a lot of words by capturing all those random thoughts twirling around in your head. You don’t want to stop and think about what to write; you want to write in order to *see* what’s on your mind.

The rules, then, for the exercise are these: Write as fast as you can, capture as many loose thoughts as possible, and don’t worry (or even think) about mistakes, appropriate language, spelling, grammar, or punctuation. That’s why it’s highly recommended you don’t see your words while you’re generating them; you’ll have plenty of time to look at them during the editing phase. Cover your screen, or use white font on a white page, but don’t look.

When your 5 minutes are up, *stop*. Reset your alarm for another 5 minutes and focus on cleaning up the mess you just created. You might:

- look for good ideas to develop or rescue from the mess,
- place all similar ideas together—like with like,
- organize the text (move sentences around to make more sense), or
- generate a few more sentences to complement what you have.

This is an exercise you should slowly transfer into your daily writing sessions. As you become more comfortable with it, plan for splitting your writing sessions into two more or less equal portions. Use the first portion to generate only; then edit during the second period.

As your text matures, you’ll be increasing the time spent editing while decreasing the time spent generating. But keep in mind the process is iterative, because editing will quite frequently require that you generate a few more words, rewrite a few sentences, or add connecting phrases.

A *variation on this exercise* you may want to try later, after you’ve practiced the one I just described for at least couple of times, is this: Instead of splitting each writing session into two portions (one for generating and one for editing), use various sessions only for generating, then several subsequent sessions only for editing. This method is known as the “fast writing, slow editing” process (see Mikhailova & Nilson, 2007).

TIP FOR DIVERSE WRITERS

If you are a writer for whom English is an Additional Language (EAL), here’s a suggestion: Try to generate your text in English (if you’re writing for an English-speaking audience). As you write quickly, nonstop, however, you may not remember certain words or phrases in English. No problem: Write them in your first/main language. Later, during the editing phase, you can translate the text.

What is important? That you capture your thoughts and reasoning about the topic. It doesn’t matter if, while you’re capturing them, the text comes out garbled, messy, incoherent, grammatically incorrect, or in a mix of two or three languages!

You can *always* come back and clean up the messy text. But if you don't capture that idea you had a few minutes ago, it may be gone for a while—or, worse, be lost forever!

If you are a neuro-diverse writer with ADHD (Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), consider this: you may feel the need for white noise or music playing in the background, while you generate text. It may also take you a few minutes to begin focusing on the writing you want to do, so scheduling chunks of time that are too small may not be useful. If you have dyslexia, and writing is quite difficult for you, try *talking* your text into a recorder or a voice-to-text app, instead of writing. Recording yourself as you verbalize your ideas generates a draft you can, later, edit carefully. The point, here, is: understand the principle behind the exercises (why I recommend them), and then adapt them, according to your preferences.

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EXERCISE 5—ORGANIZE MESSY DRAFTS

TIME NEEDED: 10 minutes x session

MATERIALS NEEDED: Timer; the text you generated last week

Once you’ve generated a bunch of words—and it’s important to have a bunch of words you can, in fact, throw away—it’s time to see whether there are any ideas that can be salvaged from the rubble. Begin by focusing on a single page of messy writing. Work on one page per day as your exercise or deliberate practice for this week. Highlight—yes, with a pen, or with the highlighter in your word processor—one key idea you wish to keep. Copy and paste that highlighted idea into a new file. Return to the messy file and continue to read. Read each remaining sentence. Do any of those sentences contain an idea similar to the one you highlighted and pasted into the new file? If so, copy and paste it next to the first idea. This way, you begin to organize the ideas in your messy draft, much in the same way you would organize the silverware in your kitchen drawer: Knives go with knives, spoons with spoons, forks with forks. Place like with like. Similar ideas go together.

At this point it does not matter—at all—whether you have three sentences saying the same thing or whether they are well written or even connected in any way. All you are looking for are similar *ideas*: like with like. Proceed with the same strategy, one page at a time. Or, if you so choose, apply this strategy in your writing session today, after you have generated at least half a page of messy text. You may want to split your daily writing sessions in half and plan to generate (only) during the first half, then to organize like with like (only) during the second half.

Example

Consider the messy text I wrote as a first draft for a small research grant I submitted. The grant proposal focused on testing the potential relationship between writing and exercising. Observe the notes to myself; the reminders; and the complete disregard for punctuation, grammar, or spelling. When I generated this text, I minimized the file on my computer screen so I wouldn’t see what I typed. Try this strategy: It really frees you from wanting to go back and correct each little typing mistake you make!

Begin with: why should we care if there is a relationship between exercise and writing? We care because, if we find a relationship, we can make a case for keeping/increase physical activity in schools, and we can propose mechanisms that facilitate writing (productivity & quality) among academics. Why? Because many academics struggle with writing, despite perceptions of

the contrary. Because little is being invested in training graduate students to become lifelong, academic writers in their fields. Because, ultimately, science, technology, and knowledge broadly speaking cannot advance without quality writing. Indirectly, even though we propose this study with a sample of college students, it may provide important clue for replication among younger school children, who are, themselves, learning to master the mechanic of cognitions involved in writing.

This study, then, has implication that might reach beyond the samples being studied, here.

(PAT: Need to define productivity). Here, we define writing productivity, as the production of writing products (publications or grant submissions) done at a regular pace, and consistently over time.

Need to also define physical exercise. (Ask P. for a general definition)

As I organized these messy ideas, like with like, I came up with the following:

Central Question: Why should we care if there is a relationship between exercise and writing?

Argument/Answer: We should care because: (1) findings will help build the case for keeping physical education in the schools' curricula; (2) findings may help develop tailored strategies for improving academic writing; and (3) because solutions to improve academic writing are needed.

Background: (1) academic writers struggle with writing; (2) science, technology, and knowledge-base in all fields require good writing in order to develop.

Implications: potential to transfer information from this study's sample to other populations (external validity).

Other Ideas to Develop: little is being done to enhance writing skills among graduate students.

Definitions Needed: writing productivity; physical exercise/physical activity.

Notice how—because I wrote the text (quickly, I might add)—I wasn't concerned about paragraph structure, or grammar, or organization. I aimed for capturing my initial thoughts about the project, as well as what the readers would want to see in the proposal. I also needed to note which constructs I would have to define clearly (both for the readers and for myself). When I went back to organize what I had, I saw a much clearer picture of what I needed to write: the arguments I needed to develop and strengthen with supporting data, the topic's background, the potential implications, as well as a few methodological matters I had to address.

In the end, here’s how this text looked. Please note, it took several edits/rewrites and feedback from my coinvestigator to arrive at this final version.

Also note, I had several citations embedded in the segment, but I deleted them to make it easier for you to read:

Rationale—Why should researchers care to explore the relationship between physical activity and academic writing? First, because this relationship has yet to be systematically examined, even though related studies have shown physical activity (especially aerobic exercise) can enhance school children’s and adolescents’ overall academic performance/achievement and improve cognitive functions in various age groups. Second, because if writing is the most important skill for success in academia, identifying strategies to promote healthy writing habits and improve writing productivity/quality should be a concern for university administrators, faculty, and graduate students. Given the established association among physical activity, academic performance/achievement, and cognition, it is reasonable to assume that promoting physical activity may represent a viable strategy for enhancing graduate students’ writing habits, productivity, and quality.

Purpose—The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore whether a relationship between physical exercise and improvement in writing habits, productivity & quality, among graduate students, occurs. If our data support this relationship, the next step will consist of securing other funding sources to study the mechanisms underlying the relationship. This proposed study (and subsequent ones) can contribute significant knowledge and practical strategies to the interdisciplinary fields of neuroscience, education, and graduate student development.

Although this may not be an outstanding piece of writing, the text achieved its purpose: to communicate *what* we wanted to do in the project, and *why*.

So spend 10 minutes on this exercise every day. Even if you don’t complete a whole page organizing like with like, limit yourself to 10 minutes maximum and return to the exercise during your next writing session. Because this represents a *strategy*—more than merely a simple exercise—you will find yourself employing the technique repeatedly in your writing, and, with time, you will become proficient in organizing! You also will notice your initial messy drafts beginning to look less messy over time. You will amaze yourself!

EXERCISE 6—KEEP AND SHARE A WRITING LOG

TIME NEEDED: 05 minutes x session

MATERIALS NEEDED: Timer; a partner or writing buddy whom you trust

This week's exercise will have you practice keeping track of your writing time. You will create a writing log for yourself. After you have created your log, you will practice *beginning* and *ending* each writing session by entering data into your log.

When I teach this strategy in my classes or writing workshops, participants invariably ask the questions “And how does this help? Sounds like more work, to me, having to write down my writing time.... Is it really necessary?” I am the first to shun the idea of extra (especially useless) work. I already have too much work scheduled on my agenda; don't need any more, thank you very much. So I do understand other people's concerns about keeping a writing log. As evidence of its utility, however, I share my own writing logs and describe how a log has fulfilled three important purposes in my writing life: (a) It has kept me on track and held me accountable to myself (when I say I spent 1 hour writing today, I have documentation that, in fact, I did spend 1 hour writing), (b) it has served as an important positive reinforcement at times when I didn't know where my time went during an especially busy week (it certainly didn't go into writing, did it?), and (c) it serves to hold me accountable to other people, such as my colleagues or my students.

In fact, Robert Boice's research on faculty productivity yielded interesting findings when he compared faculty who wrote without logging their time with faculty who wrote *and* logged their time. “By writing daily and keeping records the second group was able to outperform the first group by a factor of *four*,” writes Tara Gray (2005, pp. 19–20), summarizing Boice's research. Even more interesting are Boice's findings regarding faculty who, besides logging their writing times regularly, also shared their logs with the researchers conducting the study. When compared, faculty who shared their writing logs were *nine times* more productive than the faculty who had only logged their times, without sharing the log with someone else (Boice, 1989; Gray, 2020)!

Where or in what format you record your writing time in each writing session makes little difference. Some of my students—as technologically savvy as they are—still prefer to log their times in small, spiral-bound notebooks, which they always carry with them. Others (including me) like to use an electronic spreadsheet. I use MS Excel, as it allows me to run simple calculations if I want to. How many minutes did I write this week? How many hours did I write this month? How many minutes' writing did I average per day, in the past month? You can answer simple questions such as these if

you track by using Excel or a similar spreadsheet. But you can also use word-processing software and log your writing time using a table. Bottom line: Customize the log for your way of thinking, preferences, and needs.

However, a few items you *do* want to keep track of are things such as the date, the time you began writing, and the time you stopped (I also like to have a column with the total minutes I spent writing in that session). Some people like to count how many pages were written in each session; others like to record the number of words written (I don’t particularly care for counting words because, during editing stages, I’m cutting down the text and it feels as though I’m writing less and less when, in fact, I’m polishing more and more!). It also is important to note which writing project you worked on during the session you’re recording: Write down something simple, such as “dissertation proposal” or “abstract for such-and-such conference.” I like to have a column describing the project I intend to work on, as well as a column describing in brief detail what I actually accomplished during that particular writing session—for example, “Writing project: manuscript with Carol; Accomplished: edited the methods section.” At times, I also like to have a column to note where I should begin in the next writing session—for example, “Next time: finish editing methods section.” Finally, one of my students suggested the following idea, and I have used it ever since: Have a column where you can briefly note how you felt during that writing session. This helps you observe yourself as a writer and how you have felt while dealing with a specific writing project. Figure 2.1 gives you an example extracted from my writing log.

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FIGURE 2.1 ■ Writing Log Example

August	10	Monday	2015 Haiku	7:30 AM	7:35 AM	5	One more
August	10	Monday	2015 Nomination Letter for A.B.	7:35 AM	8:20 AM	45	
August	10	Monday	2015 Feedback on Students' B.R. for class	8:25 AM	9:30 AM		Just organizing the mtls. No writing.
August	10	Monday	2015 Feedback on Students' B.R. for class	11:15 AM	12:05 PM	50	(Reviewed 3 pieces).
August	10	Monday	2015 Feedback on Students' B.R. for class	6:30 PM	7:10 PM	40	
August	11	Tuesday	2015 Witer's Companion	7:15 AM	7:30 AM	15	
August	11	Tuesday	2015 Haiku	7:30 AM	7:35 AM	5	One more
August	11	Tuesday	2015 Feedback on Students' B.R. for class	7:35 AM	8:35 AM	60	Reviewd 3 pieces ~ 20 mins each
August	11	Tuesday	2015 Feedback on Students' B.R. for class	11:50 AM	12:15 PM	25	
August	12	Wednesday	2015 Witer's Companion	6:55 AM	7:05 AM	10	
August	12	Wednesday	2015 Haiku	7:05 AM	7:10 AM	5	#496 - will stop at # 500
August	12	Wednesday	2015 Nomination Letter for A.B.	7:10 AM	7:30 AM	20	Done!
August	12	Wednesday	2015 Feedback on Students' B.R. for class	7:40 AM	8:45 AM	65	DONE!!!!
August	13	Thursday	2015 Witer's Companion	7:25 AM	7:35 AM	10	Writing in response to prompt
August	13	Thursday	2015 Haiku	7:35 AM	7:40 AM	5	
August	13	Thursday	2015 Ped HIV Study -	7:40 AM	9:35 AM	115	Beginning to edit/polish the memo.
August	14	Friday	2015 Witer's Companion	6:50 AM	6:55 AM	5	
August	14	Friday	2015 Haiku	6:55 AM	7:00 AM	5	
August	14	Friday	2015 Ped HIV Study -	7:00 AM	8:00 AM	60	Editing: complex piece
August	15	Saturday	2015 Witer's Companion	7:50 PM	8:05 PM	15	
August	15	Saturday	2015 Conference submission with H.L.	8:05 PM	8:30 PM	25	
TOTAL HOURS THIS WEEK: 10 hs							

EXERCISE 7—DOCUMENT YOUR WRITING PROJECTS

TIME NEEDED: 10 minutes x session (05 at the beginning, 05 at the end)
MATERIALS NEEDED: Timer.

Keeping a log of my writing sessions helps provide a concrete, objective sense of the time I spend writing; which projects I tackle each time; and what I accomplish in each session. Nevertheless, I also have learned it is useful to have a mechanism for capturing the decisions I make throughout a project, a place to write notes to myself regarding items I need to check, and a system for recording the development of a particular writing piece over time. I have, therefore, learned to keep writing diaries as a mechanism and a place for documenting my progress.

All my writing projects have their own diary or journal: a Word file in which I make entries every time I work on them. When I begin a writing session using my computer, the very *first* file I open is my writing log; the *second* file, the journal; and the *third* file, the actual writing project. In my journal, I write as little or as much as I need to, but I try to capture the gist of the moment. I first date the entry, then write down at least one goal for that particular writing session (something feasible and measurable). When I end my writing session, before I record the end time in my writing log, I return to the journal to note what I accomplished and to leave a note to myself, such as “*Tomorrow: Begin at point X and add data Y to the first paragraph.*” This simple note allows me to pick up where I left off, without any need to waste time recalling *Where did I stop last time?* or *What was I supposed to do next?*

I borrowed this idea of writing diaries from my habit of maintaining a data-analysis journal for every research study I conduct, regardless whether the analyses are quantitative or qualitative. I cannot tell you how many times these diaries have saved my life—especially in instances when I’ve been away from a particular project for a while. What I mean by “saved my life” is these journals either contain evidence to support a decision I made in the past or describe the reasons underlying specific analytic choices I once made. Trying to recall why I created a new variable at a certain point in the study, how I constructed that variable, or which statistical tests contained the new variable—all these steps might be fresh in my mind as I’m conducting the analysis. But 3 weeks later the entire process is a blur, and I cannot remember the details of my reasoning for that particular project, especially when I have three or four projects going on simultaneously. I may have the statistics syntax I used to run certain analyses, but that syntax doesn’t detail my thought processes and decisions behind them.

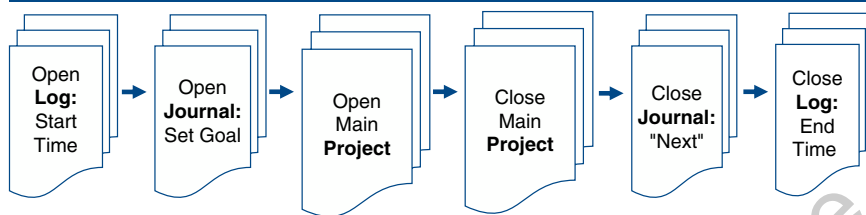
As a brief side-note: some writers have opted for blogging about their writing as a way to keep track of their progress. You may want to explore that option, as well. For

me, the thought of displaying my everchanging thinking regarding a piece of writing, for all the world to see is not very attractive. For some writers, however, it is a way of tracking that, combined with accountability, keeps them moving right along.

Regardless of the format you choose to document the progression of your writing projects, for the purpose of the exercise this week, I will encourage you to set up and begin getting used to writing about your project in a diary or journal. You will need to do the following:

1. Open a new Word file and label it “journal” or “diary.” If you are not using a computer, designate a new notebook especially for the purpose of journaling, and take notes by hand. You may consider having one journal notebook for each project, or a larger one, with sections designated for different projects.
2. Document today’s date on the first page (month, day, and year).
3. Briefly jot down what you wish to accomplish during today’s writing session. Remember: Deliberate practice involves setting goals for your practice sessions.
4. If you are struggling with the project or have questions you must answer before moving ahead, make note of these struggles and questions. Talk to yourself, here, about the project: your goals, concerns, accomplishments. Use this moment to dump or capture random thoughts about the project, if you wish. You can always copy and paste the useful ideas into your project’s file later. (And note: you’ve already begun to practice your writing.)
5. When you have situated yourself and know exactly what to do, move on to your regular writing session.
6. When your session ends, before you log the end time in your writing log, return to your diary.
7. Make note of what you were able to accomplish during your regular writing session. Check your accomplishment(s) against your proposed goal for that session.
8. Before closing the file, write down what you will need to do *next*. Be as specific as you can. “Next” may actually mean several days from now, and you need all the help you can get to remember precisely where you left off. See Figure 2.2 for the sequence I use in my own writing, as I open/close the writing log, the journal, and the actual writing project.
9. Be sure to capture important decisions you made today regarding your project and/or decisions you will need to make soon. Remember: Documenting your reasoning behind specific choices may prove useful, in the future, if you have to explain or justify them.

FIGURE 2.2 ■ Sequence I Follow to Open/Close Files During My Writing Session(s)



Example

In this example, you'll find an excerpt from the journal I maintained while writing an article. Notice how simple it is. Despite its simplicity, however, the journal helped me *never* experience writer's block while crafting the piece, because I always knew where to begin!

Even when I navigate among several different writing tasks in a given day, I know precisely where I stopped in every project and where to return—no difficulties remembering or keeping track of what to do where. I need not waste any time warming up or trying to get back into a given piece: The notes I leave are enough to guide me precisely where I need to go to restart the writing. It's like a “You Are Here” map at the airport, red dot and all!

May 25, 2014

Today: The manuscript's draft is with J. H. at the moment, waiting for his feedback. Today I'll do a final read-through and correct any problems.

Goal: Submit by Friday, May 30 (deadline is June 25).

Okay: Reread it and made some minor edits. I think it's good enough to send.

Next: Do one final round of checking the reference list for typos.

EXERCISE 8—WRITE TO LEARN (ANYTHING, INCLUDING HOW TO WRITE)

TIME NEEDED: 10–15 minutes x session

MATERIALS NEEDED: Timer

Although writing is—unequivocally—*the* most important tool for success in academic settings, we often relegate it exclusively to the professional dimension of our lives. Its value in facilitating other dimensions of everyday living is quite often ignored. This exercise, therefore, will help you think about writing as a tool for living a successful life, both inside and outside academia. Writing, for instance, can become your most important tool for learning.¹ Here’s how.

William Zinsser—who authored many acclaimed texts, including *On Writing Well* (2006)²—wrote a gem of a book called *Writing to Learn* (1988). In this text, Zinsser explores using writing for learning just about *anything*. He grounds the narrative in his personal experience trying to learn certain topics in school, his growth as a writer, and his later adventures as a writing professor at Yale. He writes, introducing his text to the reader:

The writing of [this] book proved one of its central points: that we write to *find out* what we know and what we want to say. I thought of how often as a writer I had made clear to myself some subject I had previously known nothing about by just putting one sentence after another—by reasoning my way in sequential steps to its meaning. I thought of how often the act of writing even the simplest document—a letter, for instance—had clarified my half-formed ideas. *Writing and thinking and learning were the same process.* (pp. viii–ix; emphasis added)

I strongly encourage you to read Zinsser’s book, of course, but for now, think about it ... when was the last time you tried to understand a difficult topic or think your way through a complex personal problem by writing about it, by placing one sentence after another? Probably not recently. And why not? Why don’t we resort to “thinking on paper” more often, more naturally, more automatically?

My best answer to this question is, we just haven’t been socialized into the practice. We haven’t been taught how to do it, or how to value it. Western thinking prizes the image of knowledge building we associate with Greek culture: intellectuals in public spaces, engaging in lively debates or conversations, oozing wisdom at every syllable; teaching while walking along the way (*peripatetically*, as Aristotle and his followers would call it); debating, debating, debating... Thus, for us who inhabit Western cultures, our image of knowledge development is rarely associated with *writing*; it’s more

often associated with *talking* or *discussing*. When we think of ancient scholars bent over their parchments, writing away, we tend to think of *copying*—of the scribes in biblical times who laboriously copied ancient texts, letter by letter, with modern-day digital scanning precision. We rarely associate *those* images of writing with knowledge development, knowledge building. And because this is our intellectual inheritance, we are socialized into thinking first, then copying and pasting our thoughts into a written medium, much like taking dictation from ourselves.

We rarely view writing as the tool that builds the edifice of our knowledge, that helps construct the scaffold on which we stand to survey a new landscape. We have not learned how to build knowledge using writing, nor have we learned how to prepare our writing tool for such a task. Many of us (dare I say, almost all of us?) have not learned how to *write to think* and how to *write to learn* (Bangert-Drowns et al., 2004; Klein, 1999).

This week’s exercise, therefore, will help you begin taking the first steps in a new direction: using writing to think and to learn—anything. I can’t help but invoke Zinsser (1988), once more, to help make the point clear:

Contrary to general belief, writing isn’t something that only “writers” do; writing is a basic skill for getting through life. (p. 11)

Writing organizes and clarifies our thoughts. Writing is how we think our way into a subject and make it our own. Writing enables us to find out what we know—and what we don’t know—about whatever we’re trying to learn. (p. 16 – emphasis mine)

For this exercise, you should choose a topic with which you are not familiar: something you’d *like* to learn more about—something new to you. This something could be a dimension of the research project you’re currently working on or one aspect of that literature review you’ve been dreading because you just don’t know what to look for.

The exercise consists of writing about this unknown, yet-to-be-understood subject every day for 10–15 minutes as part of your writing sessions. What will you write about? Begin with “I don’t have a clue what I’m going to say about—(subject) yet. It’s completely new to me. I do know I need to understand this better, because...” Begin by writing what the topic seems to be about (you may not even know the precise terminology for writing about it, yet, and that’s perfectly fine!). Write how you feel about it; what you think you want to know; what you *do in fact know*; and, especially, what you don’t know and need to learn. This represents an exercise in honesty, above all: being honest with yourself and admitting you don’t know something you should have known well by now. It doesn’t matter that you *should* have known it; the reality is, you don’t know it. So you’re going to learn about it.

As you determine which elements you need to learn more about, list them in writing. After your writing session ends, make it a point to begin to learn, step by step, about each element you listed in your writing. Read. Research. But don’t just read and

research: Write about what you're reading (*as you are reading*, preferably—see Chapter 12); write about what you're researching. Note your discoveries; explain new concepts to yourself—always in writing—until you get it. You will know you “got it” when you can write easily and freely about that one concept you were trying to understand.

Example

Here's an example of what I wrote when trying to learn all I could learn about self-esteem and how it has been assessed among adolescents, within the public health research literature. I realized my understanding of the self-esteem construct was quite fuzzy when I decided to review systematically the studies exploring the relationships among self-esteem, sexual intentions, attitudes, and sexual behaviors of adolescents. Had someone asked me to define self-esteem, I probably could not have gone beyond the idea of “how much one likes one's self.” I had to be honest and admit that although I had great plans for reviewing the literature, I lacked basic knowledge regarding the self-esteem construct. I decided to slow down and learn all I could about it, beginning with its definition—or, as I would later learn, with its multiple, slightly different definitions. (Note: Learning there were multiple definitions, with nuanced variations, had important implications for my review.) Here's an excerpt from my writing-to-learn process, at the time:

I need to provide the definitions of self-esteem (SE) here.

Also need to discuss whether SE is a stable or variable trait. What is it? Stable or variable? I don't quite know. Can it change? Researchers debate whether it is possible to change SE or not; Harter (in Baumeister's edited book), for instance, while acknowledging that some authors do not believe self-esteem can change—believes, herself, that SE is amenable to change, especially among children and adolescents at specific times in their lives when the self is re-evaluated (coinciding, often times with changes in school grade levels); however, she demonstrates some skepticism concerning the possibility of change, when self-esteem scores are particularly low, especially if the individuals lack social and emotional support to sustain any kind of change. Interesting. . . .

You will notice how unpolished the paragraph sounds—and because I didn't write it for anyone else to read, it is just that: unpolished. But it captured my thinking as I was learning about self-esteem, as I raised specific questions regarding what I *didn't know* and, therefore, needed to learn. By the way, the question of whether SE is stable or variable is not yet resolved among scholars; the debate continues, as do most good debates in the social sciences.

You get the idea. You write your thoughts, and as you learn something, you express those thoughts in simple, declarative sentences, bit by bit, arranging your knowledge in a logical format, focusing on communicating clearly. Practice this writing every day for a few days, and I guarantee your knowledge on a given subject will increase or deepen. No doubt about it!

CHAPTER 2—MAIN POINTS IN ONE PAGE

1. You are a professional writer. If you are a college student, a graduate student, faculty, research staff, or an administrator, you write for a living. Academics write for a living.
2. Even if you don't see yourself as a writer, *yet* practicing new habits and strategies will help you develop this new perspective and, over time, *grow into* this new identity.
3. To develop this new perspective or this new identity, you'll need to take three steps: Step 1: Embrace the “write” attitude; Step 2: Manage the contingencies; Step 3: Practice.
4. The most appropriate and helpful attitude you can embrace as an academic writer is this one: (a) believing that developing a healthy writing habit *can*, in fact, lead to improvements in the quality of your writing and to stress-free productivity *and* (b) valuing improvement and stress-free productivity.
5. Managing contingencies means handling and controlling the factors that either facilitate or hinder your ability to write regularly (for instance, managing distractions).
6. Practicing writing—especially deep practice—entails more than mere repetition; it involves setting goals, slowing down, paying attention to mistakes, and correcting them as quickly as possible.
7. Exercise 1—Scheduling your writing sessions is the single best contingency-management strategy.
8. Exercise 2—Incrementally, add time to each writing session.
9. Exercise 3—Read *about* writing a few minutes before each writing session. Separate generating from editing by writing fast, editing slowly.
10. Exercise 4—Separate generating from editing by writing fast, editing slowly.
11. Exercise 5—Organize messy drafts by placing similar ideas together (like with like).
12. Exercise 6—Keep track of your writing in a log.
13. Exercise 7—Document your writing in a writing journal or project diary.
14. Exercise 8—Use writing to *think* and to diagnose what you still need to *learn*.

NOTES

1. As I mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, writing is equally helpful for healing from psychological traumas. A whole body of literature describes the benefits of writing about traumatic events and the healing that often results from such writing. If you would like to explore that literature, begin by reading Janet Conner's (2008) *Writing Down Your Soul*. She compiles and comments on much of the available research on writing as a tool for healing. If you would rather begin experimenting with writing to heal, check out Pennebaker's workbook, *Writing to Heal* (2004, 2013).
2. This book, alone, has sold more than 1 million copies since its first edition 36 years ago, *without* advertising (McCutcheon, 2006, p. 25)!

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