

Writing Productively

Online Writing Resource



Writing Productively

Introduction

To be successful, academics need to be productive writers. Publications propel academic careers, and audit regimes like the REF reinforce this emphasis on written outcomes. This generates a good deal of pressure.

Most academics are familiar with the effects of that pressure: writing backlogs accompanied by feelings of stress and guilt. If this resonates with you, the words 'writing productively' will probably make your heart sink rather than sing.

People who want to write more but feel unproductive need practical advice on how to approach writing differently. Many writers have reflected on what helps people write productively; and technical minds have translated these insights into apps. This document summarises some key ideas, books and apps for academics who want to write more productively.

The givens

Do it your way (as long as it works)

In her book *'Air and Light and Time and Space'*, Helen Sword shows that the ways in which academics approach writing are rich and varied. She based her conclusions on in-depth interviews with 100 productive academic writers and editors as well as 1,223 anonymous questionnaires. If you are curious about how successful academic write, this book is a great place to start.

Accept that it's hard work

Writing habits are diverse, but the thread that runs through Sword's book is that academic writing is hard work. Paul Silvia puts that right at the heart of his humorous, content-packed book *'How to write a lot'*. There is no easy shortcut or 10-step programme to producing good academic writing. Writing about complex issues that require deep understanding takes time and effort.

While that may seem like discouragement rather than upbeat advice, many people actually find it reassuring to know that their numerous re-thinks, re-writes and edits are normal and necessary.

Writing Productively

The four pillars of productive writing

Secure writing time (and protect it)

The first pillar of productive writing is to schedule writing time by putting it in your diary, committing to it and protecting it. If you tend to write in your office and are prone to being interrupted, this might mean putting up a (non-negotiable) 'do not disturb' sign. If you are easily sidetracked by the siren call of your phone or social media, you might want to use one of the apps described further down to keep you focused.

Do you find it hard to imagine adding writing to an already-stretched schedule? Then turn to Eviatar Zeruvabel's *The Clockwork Muse*. Zeruvabel is a productive academic writer himself and his instructions for how to fit writing into life are practical and precise. He makes a strong case for scheduling writing time then breaking it down into tasks and setting concrete goals.

Zeruvabel coined the now-popular distinction between A and B time writing. *A-time writing* (which, for most people, will be the 'slam it on the page' stages of writing, and major rewrites) usually lends itself better to earlier parts of the day; *B-time writing* (local editing, proofreading, reference checking ...) typically works better later in the day. Productivity decreases when there is a mismatch between the time of the day and the writing task. Creating appropriate synergies gives you a leg-up and boosts productivity.

Make writing routine

Routine! Not the most exciting word. Surely writing is juicier than that? Apparently not. The second pillar of productive writing is making writing so routine that it becomes a habit. 'Routine' means regularly, in small bites. It relies on the first pillar of scheduling.

Robert Boyce's *Professors as Writers* is the oft-cited key publication here. It is based on a landmark piece of research on how academics write. Boyce distinguished between three standard approaches to writing: emergency writing (writing fuelled by deadline pressure), spontaneous writing (writing when inspired) and scheduled writing (writing daily for 30 minutes). The study followed a large cohort of early-career academic staff trying out all three approaches over a period of time.

Across the board, the academics in Boyce's research were most productive when they followed the low-key, structured method of writing for 30 minutes a day: when they adopted this approach they produced significantly more pages and creative ideas.

Of course, all writers will feel more inspired on some days than others, and deadline adrenaline can give you the push that you need to complete a writing project. But overall, the engine of productive writing is routine.

The reason for that seems to be that when writing becomes routine, it stops being a big deal. There is no decision involved on whether to write, so no hump to get over. Last-minute work spreads out over a longer period of time; the urge to procrastinate diminishes as productivity increases.

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Practise (train)

In 1934, Dorothea Brande published *Becoming a writer*, a book that continues to be a source of inspiration for many. In it, she talks with passion about the practice of writing every day, come rain or come shine. This has since been re-articulated by numerous other authors in different frameworks.

The idea of writing daily is compatible with the outcome of Boyce's study, of course. But what is distinct about the third pillar of productive writing is its emphasis on practice, or training. You are just writing – no more, no less. You write without editing; you let your thoughts walk on the page without changing them. Whatever you commit to (750 words, half an hour – whatever works for you) becomes your writing practice. The practice is the point.

The stumbling block many people run into with this kind of writing is that it seems messy: the words feel wrong.

'Of course the words are wrong,' Peter Elbow says in *Writing with Power* 'That's how it goes with words'.

This statement is echoed in many approaches to productivity. It's another way of saying: relax. You are going to get it wrong. It is not just inevitable but necessary, because bad writing leads to good writing.

Rowena Murray coined a memorable metaphor for this. To produce 'fragrant' writing, she says, we need to produce 'manure' writing first. Academics often cling to fragrant writing – the edited, polished draft. They find manure writing too painful, and try to avoid it. The price for this is decreased productivity.

Practice writing will rarely produce good writing instantly, but it will do other things. It will help you make writing a habit and strengthen your 'writing muscle'. It will also help you 'see' your thoughts, establish new connections and articulate new insights. This 'thinking on the page' is the gateway to chapters, articles and books.



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Become part of a community of writers

Much writing – and academic writing in particular – occurs in solitude. That solitude can be welcome and productive, but it can also create a sense of isolation that stifles productivity.

The fourth pillar of writing productively encourages tapping into the energy of a community by working alongside others. At writing retreats, academics commit to working on their own writing, but shoulder-to-shoulder with others doing the same. This format (which ranges in length from one to several days) is particularly successful in helping to generate pages and break through productivity barriers.

In *The handbook of Academic Writing: A fresh Approach*, Rowena Murray and Sarah Moore emphasise the importance of community as a portal to engaging in productive writing. Moore developed the format of the Structured Writing Retreat, where writing slots are interspersed with short discussions and reflections. The Institute for Academic Developments offers regular writing retreats for postdocs and staff at all schools, as well as training for those who want to run retreats within their own department (<http://edin.ac/2CPdLtA>).



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Apps

The four pillars of writing productively are not just the subjects of books; they have also been translated into apps. Here are some of the best ones.

750 Words

750 Words is one of the most popular writing productivity apps. Your aim is to write 750+ words daily. The app will track them for you and give you points, cheer you on for streaks, mirror how often you got distracted, analyse the mindsets of your words, and make you part of a large community of writers (390,747, at last count)

Write or Die

The *Write or Die* app is designed to get you to finish your work. You set a time limit and commit to writing a particular number of words within that time. *Write or Die* sets consequences if you don't. You can choose the 'level of retribution': a negative image, an unpleasant sound or, in kamikaze mode, your writing starts deleting itself a word at a time... A little hardcore, but it seems to work for a lot of people.

Written? Kitten!

If you need positive reinforcement rather than threats, *Written? Kitten!* may work better for you. This app offers rewards (in the shape of, yes, kittens) when you reach your daily writing goal. You set the pace in terms of word count/time ratio). Part of the appeal of this app lies in the simple, distraction-free interface

Pomodoro, and many offshoots

Pomodoro breaks scheduled writing time down into 'pomodoros' – 25 minute time-spans (considered to be the optimum period to focus on a single task without distraction) with specific associated tasks. It encourages breaks for sustaining your energy over a longer period of time, and keeps track of pomodoros on a daily and weekly basis.

Forest

The *Forest* app supports you in staying off your phone while you are writing. It creates a virtual image of a seed growing into a tree as you spend uninterrupted time on writing; when you get distracted, the tree wilts and eventually dies. But *Forest* goes a step beyond the virtual: it has teamed up with a tree-planting organisation, and the virtual coins earned by users through uninterrupted periods of writing result in real trees being planted (222,879 at last count).

FocusMe

Most people have a downfall online activity that they turn to when writing becomes uncomfortable or difficult. This app allows you block access to websites and applications specified by you (Facebook, Twitter and Mail are classics) for a shorter period in your writing schedule - or blacklist them altogether.

Coach.me

Coach.me is a multi-platform app that uses community encouragement and digital coaching to help you build new habits. Its dedicated track for writers not only supports daily writing but also provides encouragement from other writers.

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Conclusion

Advice on how to write more productively is remarkably consistent.

The four pillars (schedule, make it routine, train) are simple and have made a big difference for many. Using an app that addresses your main challenge will make it easier to put these ideas into practice.



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This resource was created by Mimo Caenepel.

Mimo runs Research Communication Scotland (mimocaenepel.com/) where she works closely with academics on honing the skills that are vital to communicating research clearly, concisely and effectively.

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