

How to Write More

Many academic writers will agree that writing:

- is critical to academic success.
- takes serious time and effort.
- is nonetheless often given a lower priority than other tasks.

Most students and professional scholars wish they could write more—or more often, or more efficiently. The nature of academic life, with its multiple conflicting demands, makes it difficult to find time to write; for anyone with additional commitments, such as caregiving, it is especially difficult.

We can't help you find more time in your life, but we hope it will help you make good use of the writing time that you do have. Every writer is different; not all of these strategies will work well for everyone.

Regular writing habits

Some writers find that creating and maintaining a **regular writing habit**, with daily or weekly scheduled writing time, increases their productivity. It can help some writers stay on track because it takes the decision-making out of their day: they don't wonder *if* they will write; they just write when they normally write as part of an established routine. These writers may do some of the following things:

- set a realistic daily or weekly **goal**, written down somewhere visible. For example:
 - write a certain number of words per day / week
 - write for a certain amount of time every day / week
 - write to explore one idea per day / week.
- write at the **same time and place** every day, and precede it by the same habits (i.e., have breakfast, go for a walk, then write for two hours).
- choose a time of day when they are most able to **focus** for a sustained time.
- communicate to their families, friends and colleagues that they are unavailable during their scheduled writing times.
- avoid checking emails, social media, and other sources of distraction during their writing times.

Irregular writing sprees

Many accomplished and productive academic writers **don't have regular writing habits** (see [this article](#) by Helen Sword, or her book, *Air & Light & Time & Space*). Instead, they may write for short or long bursts whenever there is available time in their schedules, and that might mean writing just once in a week, or less often; it might also mean not writing at all for three weeks, and then writing for three days in a row. Here are some approaches that Sword has observed in her research:

- When you want to write, use the same **cues** every time to get started. For example, make a pot of tea, close or minimize open websites and turn off notifications, grab a favourite cardigan or blanket, repeat an encouraging mantra.

- Before you finish a writing session, leave yourself a starting point for the next session: a question, an intention, the next step of a process. Knowing what you ought to do the next time you sit down to write will help you get going efficiently.
- Write for any length of time you choose to: ten minutes, three hours; whatever works for your own circumstances.
- Try giving yourself a reward for meeting a writing goal, or a negative consequence for not meeting it, and see what works best for you.

Know yourself

As a writer, know yourself. Understand what works best for you.

- Do you like to have several uninterrupted hours blocked off for writing, or to write in short bursts in between other tasks?
- Do you prefer to write in the morning, or at another time of day?
- Do you like to plan out your main ideas in advance, in a highly structured point or outline form, and then flesh them out? Or write long blocks of exploratory sentences to find out what you think and develop your ideas?
- Where do you like to write? What surroundings make you focused or inspired?
- Do you need silence, ambient noise, or quiet music while you write?

Put words on the page

Regardless of whether you prefer a regular writing schedule or write whenever you're able to, the following strategies can help you **put words on the page**:

- Start with 10 minutes of free writing to **warm up**. Try to keep on writing after the 10 minutes are up.
- Give yourself very **small, specific tasks** to get started, for example:
 - ask yourself, “what is the next small step to make this project move forward?” and then jot down the answer to this question.
 - write five bullet points, or five sentences.
 - write one paragraph. Then another. (A paper might look daunting, but it's just many paragraphs strung together.)
 - write two or three questions you'd like to explore (try “why?” or “how?” questions).
 - use writing prompts, such as, “what do I think I know about this topic, and what questions do I have about it?” or “what do others think about this topic and why?”
- Give yourself permission to **write poor-quality content** as well as really good stuff; you can cut “garbage” content later on, when you edit.
- Write as if you were **talking informally** to a friend, family member, colleague, etc., or write a journal entry. You can make the language more formal later.
- **If you are stuck** writing about one aspect of your work, write about a **different** aspect; or if you can't write the discussion section, try the methods section.
- Try **writing by hand on paper** instead of typing, especially if you're brainstorming ideas and looking for relationships among them.
- **Go for a walk** to think over an idea—or to give yourself a break from thinking over an idea.

- When you're writing, avoid editing, proofreading, fact-checking, etc. Edit later.
- [Avoid or manage distractions.](#)
- Manage [procrastination](#)
- Do something to **make writing more enjoyable**. The more positive an experience it is for you, the [less likely](#) you are to procrastinate.
- Acknowledge your writing **successes**, however small.

When you're not writing:

- Carry a notebook and pencil around to note down good ideas as they come to you.
- Give yourself permission to take breaks from your writing.
- Take good care of your health.
- Build your own community of writers to share ideas and encouragement.

Resources

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