

How Academics Survive the Writing Grind: Some Anecdotal Advice

A PhD student approached me after a writing workshop to recount his tale of woe. “I write these messy, incoherent first drafts,” he lamented. “They’re absolutely awful! Then I have to work on them for hours and hours to bash them into shape. It’s such a frustrating process, and so discouraging. My PhD adviser is a really good writer; she makes it all look so easy. I wish I were more like her.” I didn’t get a chance to interview the student’s supervisor; but if I had, I can guess what she might have told me. Probably something like this: “I write these messy, incoherent first drafts—they’re absolutely awful! Then I have to work on them for hours and hours to bash them into shape. Writing can be a hard and frustrating process, but for the most part, I really enjoy the challenge of honing and polishing my sentences until I get them just right.” Same story, different spin.

Of all the myths surrounding academic writing, the fallacy of effortless productivity is among the most persistent. Many academics tell me that they find the craft of writing to be fascinating, pleasurable, even exhilarating:

I see writing as an artisanal activity, like being a potter or a woodworker. The craft of putting words together—you do a whole range of things simultaneously—just strikes me as so interesting. (*Ludmilla Jordanova, History, Durham University*)

There’s a deep craft satisfaction in writing that comes before everything except family. (*Carlo Rotella, English, Boston College*)

Only a rare few, however, say that they “find writing easy”—and even

then, mostly in the context that they “find *writing* easy” compared to other aspects of the process, such as the research, planning, and editing:

When I’m really going, I just fly. It’s what they call “flow.” I love it. But I know that I’m going to have to go back later and take a third of the prose out. (*Stephen Ross, English, Victoria University*)

Others describe the writing process itself as extraordinarily taxing:

It’s mostly pain, let’s be honest about it. It’s grueling. Torture is too strong a word. But it’s hard. It’s draining. (*James Shapiro, English, Columbia University*)

The bottom line is that it takes most academics a long time—whether at the front end of the writing process, at the back end, or both—to produce high-quality work. Apprentice academics may regard the enormous effort involved as a symptom of their own inadequacy, especially if they have been led to believe that writing is supposed to be easy:

When I first started on my PhD, I wrote a lot of stuff, because the books all say you should produce x amount of words a day. So I sat down every day and said, “Right, I’m going to write two thousand words today.” And I did that for three or four months and ended up with thousands and thousands of words. But they weren’t connected, they weren’t going anywhere. Afterwards I had to go back and spend months organizing what I’d written: cutting it down, creating coherent chapters. (*Ewan Pohe, Māori Studies, Victoria University of Wellington*)

Experienced writers, on the other hand, understand that messiness and frustration come with the territory:

It doesn’t come out right the first time. You work it over and over—many drafts. That’s the really discouraging, scary part of the process. It feels like it will never come together—and then it does. Just hanging in there

through that development phase, that messy phase, is so important.
(*Jennifer Meta Robinson, Anthropology, Indiana University*)

The PhD student at my workshop hadn't yet learned any of that. But what if his supervisor had told him about her own background and processes as an academic writer: her sources of learning, her struggles to improve, her day-to-day schedule, her history of rejections, her pleasure in the craft? Perhaps then he would have been able to see his own frustrations as normal and even necessary speed bumps on the road to successful writing.

When I ask writers to describe their daily writing habits—where, when, and how they write—many quickly tilt the conversation toward craft: that is, “how they write” in the sense of how they shape the words on the page, rather than “how they write” in the sense of how those words got there in the first place. From the cadence of a paragraph to the structure of a book, I learned, stylish academic writers sweat the details. They think about *elegance*:

The ability to write elegantly in the style appropriate for a specific journal is essential in science. We spend ages crafting even very short articles before we send them off to journals like *Science* or *Nature*. (*Russell Gray, Director, Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History*)

They think about *concision*:

The quality I try for most in my writing is succinctness—some people waffle on so much—but it's bloody hard. I think it's one of the hardest forms of writing. (*Michael Corballis, Psychology, University of Auckland*)

They think about *structure*:

I'm very much a structural thinker, so when I go for a run and think about my writing, I'm already hearing the shape of the essay. As I write, that

doesn't usually change much at all: when I'm working on a section, I know that this is going to be the midsection or the second paragraph in.

(Margaret Breen, English, University of Connecticut)

They think about *voice*:

I think my writing is less often affected by other people's style than it used to be, and I've found a voice. It's not an easy voice. It's a voice that takes a lot of pruning and editing, of course. Nothing you write is ever a first draft.

(Trudy Rudge, Nursing, University of Sydney)

They think about *identity*:

The question I ask my students is, "How do you write your research up in First Nation studies in ways that don't reproduce those 'othering' discourses that have plagued anthropology or sociology or other disciplines for so long?" *(Dory Nason, First Nations Studies, University of British Columbia)*

They think about *clarity*:

In science, sentences should be logical and unambiguous. You're not writing literature, where ambiguity might be a good thing. There you might want two possible meanings on purpose. But in a scientific paper, you don't want that. You want a very clear meaning. *(Wim Vanderbauwhede, Computing Science, University of Glasgow)*

They think about *accessibility*:

I try to model my work after the very accessible style of writers such as Lionel Trilling and William Empson; it has a strong colloquial aspect to it, where they're not afraid to use the full resources of the language, and they don't try to write like some sort of neutered computer. *(Robert Miles, English, University of Victoria)*

They think about *vocabulary*:

In history, your audience often includes ordinary people who have a curiosity or passion for the past, which marks it out from academic disciplines where the more polysyllabic words and the more theoreticians you invoke in one sentence, the more illustrious you are, even if no one has any idea what the words mean. (*Michael Reilly, Māori, Pacific, and Indigenous Studies, University of Otago*)

They think about *syntax*:

I learned quite a lot from one of my coauthors. I would start off a sentence with “This shows that,” and he would say, “Well, Miles, *what* shows that? What does the *this* refer to?” Now I find myself saying the same to all my PhD students, with great relish, when they start a sentence with “this.” (*Miles Padgett, Physics, University of Glasgow*)

They think about *agency*:

I always use “I,” because it’s always my own views. I never write “one,” and I don’t let my students write like that. I want to see the agency. I don’t allow the passive voice because it excludes agency. (*Martin Fellenz, Business, Trinity College Dublin*)

They think about *audience*:

A colleague of mine read one of my early papers and said, “You know this is very solid research, but it’s boring.” That was a really important experience—I thought academic writing was supposed to go on and on and on: “Now we have Table 24 and Equation 13.” Now I work hard to make it interesting. (*Janet Currie, Economics and Public Affairs, Princeton University*)

They think about *telling a story*:

I have learned to work harder at writing stories. Now, I start more broadly, stepping back from the forest to see the trees, so to speak, to provide context and set up impact. (*Kurt Albertine, Pediatrics, University of Utah*)

They think about “*the big picture*”:

My job is to tell a story about what’s going on in this particular field, how do we know this, and who has told us what the data are, and I tie all that into the big picture. It’s kind of like putting together Legos into a shape or construction. (*Donald A. Barr, Human Biology, Stanford University*)

They even think about visual issues such as *typography, pagination, and layout*:

I seem to have a pretty good eye for layout, which is important when you’re writing your own grant proposals: deciding the font, deciding the headings, deciding the figures and the tables so the page looks pleasing to the eye. (*Patricia Culligan, Engineering, Columbia University*)

Successful writers also attend closely to the *technologies* of writing: that is, to the physical and electronic tools they use in their shaping and crafting of language. These days, most academics do the bulk of their writing and editing on a computer:

To me, writing is something you do at a keyboard. I like to fiddle with sentences as I’m writing them; if you do that on a typewriter or with a pen, the result is extremely messy. That gives you negative feedback, and it becomes depressing. On a screen, you can get the latest version and it looks tidy. (*Kwame Anthony Appiah, Philosophy, Princeton University*)

Some supplement standard word-processing programs with specialized desktop software such as Freemind or Scrivener (for mind mapping and nonlinear drafting, respectively) and online file storage and sharing services such as Google Drive or Dropbox. For many, however—especially

those who came to word processing relatively late in their academic careers—there is still nothing quite like the feeling of pen on paper:

For important work, I've always enjoyed using foolscap or yellow-lined paper. After I type it up on the computer, I make my changes on a printout of the original draft, and then when it gets too clogged up, I print off another triple-spaced copy and go from there. (*Daniel M. Albert, Ophthalmology, University of Wisconsin*)

In *Lines: A Brief History*, anthropologist Tim Ingold reflects on how “the practice of inscription” narrows the gap between thought and expression:

In typing and printing the intimate link between the manual gesture and the inscriptive trace is broken. The author conveys feeling by his choice of words, not by the expressiveness of his lines.

Even writers who work mainly on computers affirm the cognitive and artisanal value of writing by hand:

I sometimes like to write longhand if I am thinking about something difficult. I curl up on the bed or couch and then transfer it to the computer later. I find it useful because it slows you down. Sometimes I even copy things over longhand to make myself think about the sense of it. (*Marjorie Howes, English, Boston College*)

While academics with a natural flair for language may well have a better chance of becoming stylish writers than those who merely put in the hours—in the same way that elite athletes at the pinnacle of their sport draw on innate talent and an appropriate physique as well as intensive training—the fact remains that *all* successful academics work hard, one way or another, at the craft of writing. What's more, many of them relish rather than resist the effort and challenge involved:

I hear the sound of the words as I write, and I care about that. I derive

pleasure from polishing my work and hearing it; I take pleasure in getting the language right. (*Kevin Kenny, History, Boston College*)

Perhaps it's a matter of reframing what we mean by *success*:

Success is a process, a mindful process. A lot of students make the mistake of comparing their beginning efforts with other people's final products, which is not a smart thing to do, since rarely do you start with something wonderful. And even if you did, it wouldn't be any fun. (*Ellen Langer, Psychology, Harvard University*)

Psychologist Carol Dweck distinguishes between people with "a fixed mindset," who believe that talent is a finite commodity, and those with a "growth mindset," who believe that our innate talents can and should be stretched, challenged, and changed. For fixed-mindset people, Dweck explains, "effort is a bad thing. It, like failure, means you're not smart or talented. If you were, you wouldn't need effort." For growth-mindset people, on the other hand, "effort is what makes you smart or talented." Writers with a fixed mindset are likely to resist learning new skills, whereas those with a growth mindset never stop seeking out new ways of developing and testing the limits of their craft.



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