

Why Writing Productively Is So Difficult, and What You Can Do about It

GINA HIATT

I AM A CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST WHO CONDUCTED A THRIVING PRIVATE PRACTICE FOR OVER TWENTY-FIVE YEARS. AT SOME POINT, HOWEVER, I tired of focusing on deep-seated problems and longed to help people make tangible, external changes in their lives.

I began coaching thirteen years ago and luckily started with academics. Here were intelligent and articulate people struggling to finish their articles and books, miserable because they found writing productively to be so difficult. I noted their sense of isolation and their need for external accountability. These observations led me to create an online coaching and accountability service for academic writers who want to become more creative and productive.

Because I'm independent of any educational institution, I have been able to learn a lot about what makes writing particularly difficult in academic settings. My hope is that academic writers who feel guilty about not writing enough will understand that theirs is a common problem and that there are solutions available. Perhaps my outsider's point of view will play some small role in moving a few graduate programs, faculty development centers, and provost offices to help their academics become more creative and productive writers.

This article is not written in a scholarly format. I'm writing in the first person and giving my observations. There is no formal research involved; my opinions result from observing how thousands of scholars who were struggling to become productive writers learned new habits and succeeded. I've been able to work with these scholars individually and in group coaching sessions, as well as through my Web site. My work gives me a unique, behind-the-scenes perspective on the issues that academics deal with when they write.

Why Is Scholarly Writing So Difficult for So Many?

Several factors besides the advanced subject matter may prevent an academic from becoming a prolific writer. Most undergraduates or graduate students just starting out do not work on long-term writing

GINA HIATT is a clinical psychologist and coach and the founder of Academic Ladder Inc., a company dedicated to helping professors and graduate students complete and publish their research and writing projects. She is also the founder of the Academic Writing Club, a Web site providing accountability, progress tracking, coaching, and small-group support, in addition to discussion and education about how to thrive in academia.

projects without external deadlines.¹ Writing without external deadlines is completely unlike writing a ten-page term paper due next Wednesday; that paper could probably be pounded out on Tuesday night. But writing “binges” as Robert Boice calls them (39), don’t work for writing a book. Or they work suboptimally. It would be foolish to wake up the week before a book or scholarly article is due to the publisher and work for seven days without sleeping and expect to produce anything worth submitting.

The much lower level of accountability that faculty members experience leads them to flounder. Those who are lucky enough to have been born knowing the secrets of writing without structure can forge ahead, but many are left behind. There are few time constraints and almost no structure associated with most professional, scholarly writing. As a matter of fact, it’s common for professors to contact me for help during their sabbaticals, when they have the least amount of structure.

New professors are overwhelmed in their first years, prepping and teaching courses, learning their way around, getting involved in service, and navigating departmental politics and meetings. All these responsibilities are scheduled, and others will notice if the individual doesn’t show up. So these important, urgent tasks have the much-needed time constraints that force faculty members to produce. But by pleasing others in the short term, professional academics find that over time they have placed their own work at the back of the queue.

There are different stressors mid-career, when faculty members are asked to spend more time as administrators or to run time-consuming committees. The relief of getting tenure often carries with it the expectation of taking one’s research in a new direction. For some, it’s difficult to jump-start their writing during this period.

When I started working with academics I was shocked to discover the astonishingly

unkind and cutting remarks that they write to each other. The lack of civility in their comments has a disturbing impact on the receiver. I’ve met so many academics who have been traumatized and hurt by them; overwhelmingly negative criticism drains them of the ability to write.

In reaching tenure decisions, tenure committee members usually weight research publication rate the same as, and often more heavily than, teaching ability. Yet there is significantly more support for teaching than for productive writing in most institutions. It’s certainly possible to help faculty members become creative, productive writers. So why is there disparity in training? It’s a situation that has harmed many academics who desperately need help with their writing.

For some reason, there is less judgment about getting help with one’s teaching than there is about getting help with writer’s block. Many academics looking for writing help want to remain anonymous. But it’s hard for a university to maintain writers’ anonymity if that very university runs the program offered to help its faculty. An outside agency can provide anonymous help that will feel safer.

When we consider why productive writing in academia is so difficult, we need to consider a factor that is often ignored or discounted: anxiety. Anxiety is the fundamental cause of most cases of writer’s block in academia. Anxiety is common in any high-level profession filled with intelligent people who know what they are capable of achieving. But it is particularly rampant in academia. I’m convinced that anxiety is at the root of what prevents many academics from becoming productive writers.

Before becoming an academic coach, I had a private practice in McLean, Virginia, down the street from the CIA. My patients were all from either corporate environments or the CIA (I had a special clearance). The average person would imagine that people who work at the CIA are more anxious than most.

Perhaps readers of this essay will not be surprised to hear that anxiety is more prevalent in academia than in other environments.

Why does anxiety level matter? Readers may remember learning in Psych 101 that there is an inverted, U-shaped curve for anxiety. The curve illustrates that it's not good to have no anxiety and that it's not good to have too much anxiety. A person can be not anxious enough—too laid back to bother functioning well, if at all. Someone who is not nervous enough will ignore the warning signals indicating that something needs to be done. At the middle of the curve is the optimal level of anxiety, where the individual is aware of what needs to be done and is ideally motivated and capable of achieving it.

Then there is the level of anxiety at which a person is so incapacitated that it's difficult to think clearly. Tasks that have any level of complexity can appear overwhelming, and defense mechanisms quickly kick in to lower the anxiety level. When it comes to scholarly writing, one of the most common defensive behaviors is to procrastinate. That's easy to do in an academic environment when class preparation, teaching, office hours, meetings, and service also demand attention. Procrastination is so handy that writers don't even know they're doing it until it's too late.

Procrastination may feel like forgetting. For example, for months I "forgot" that this essay was due. I then spent several days "getting myself ready" to write it. And then, as my anxiety built, I just plain old avoided it.

Luckily I follow at least some of the precepts I teach. Soon after learning that I would be writing this essay, I made detailed lists of ideas, read and reread the information that was provided, and ended up with several pretty good pages of material. It was easy for me to do those things when my anxiety level was relatively low.

Most of the professors I've worked with have gone through a similar process of forgetting, procrastination, and avoidance, but

on a much bigger scale. And their denial of reality carries a much bigger penalty than an isolated act of procrastination. Often they have done little writing or publishing while putting their heart and soul into the rest of their career. Then one morning they wake up with a start and realize that if they don't start writing they are not going to achieve their professional goals, such as getting a job, tenure, a grant, or a promotion. By the time they seek my help, their anxiety is out of control; usually they are almost incapable of writing.

What Can Scholars Do to Write More Productively?

Starting with the first day at work, new professors should remember that writing is a long-term project and must be treated like one. Despite the overwhelming number of new responsibilities, I recommend they start early on a writing project. They may be tired from completing the dissertation, but they should start anyway. The key is to work in short writing sessions. This may sound counterintuitive. Most people think that you need big chunks of time to do great work. Many have said to me, "But I need time just to warm up and remember what I last worked on. Then I need to plan what to work on next and stare at the screen while I think of what to say."

In fact, research has shown that professors who write in short sessions, whether they naturally work that way or were taught and coached to work that way, write and publish more articles, receive tenure at a higher rate, and report more creative thoughts than professors who take a different approach to their writing (Boice 143–44). It makes sense that actively thinking about your work (by writing) is more powerful than "just" thinking. For one thing, it's hard to concentrate on abstract topics for a long period of time. By writing, you are forcing yourself to focus, and in a sense you are illuminating neural pathways in your brain. By stopping your writing

session before you burn out and then waiting one day before continuing to write, you allow those neurons the time to seek new connections. The result is that in the middle of your shower or while driving home you are surprised to discover that you have an amazing new idea that ties your argument together.

In my workshops I show images of brains to illustrate how the right hemisphere is the place that ideas come from; but these ideas have no words. The left hemisphere, being critical, analytic, and able to digest only one word at a time (as in talking and writing), finds it difficult to translate the seemingly incoherent ideas of the right hemisphere into language. The thoughts come out sounding like poor echoes of finished work you have submitted in the past. The left hemisphere wants to reject these sentences. And if you try to improve them, you get caught in the trap of perfectionism. It's much better to write as if everything you're working on is a rough draft. You will be able to perfect your work in later writing sessions as the ideas become clearer. Right now just jump-start the neural pathways.

From a practical standpoint, consider how few large chunks of time you have during a week. If anything should stop you from using those infrequent time slots, you will end up doing no writing at all. It is very difficult to pick up writing that you haven't looked at in over a week. So a long writing session is hard to find time for, hard to start, and exhausting to finish. Even if you are happy with what you achieve, you'll find yourself avoiding working like that for quite some time. That's why short writing sessions work so well. You can only get a few of your brilliant ideas out at a time, no matter how long the session; the shorter sessions lead to greater ease, creativity, and flow in writing; and it's much easier to find fifteen to forty-five minutes in a busy day than it is to find five hours. But the best reason for shorter, focused sessions is that you will enjoy the writing process more, which will make you feel more connected to your work.

Experiment to find the length of time that works best for you. Schedule your writing time. You may be surprised at how many pockets of time there are in your day. Plan ahead and write the time in your calendar. Start writing at your planned time, whether or not you feel inspired, have any idea what you're going to write, or are in the mood. To help yourself get going, set a timer. Start writing when the timer starts, keep writing (and avoid getting distracted) while the timer is on, and stop when time is up. During this period you won't research, check on anything, create citations, or do anything that isn't producing your own writing. (Although you can, of course, make notes on what you will do later.) This precious writing time is for you to find out what you are thinking.

If you do this daily, you will find it much easier to start writing, you'll notice more creative thoughts during the day, you'll enjoy your writing more, and you'll end up writing more. There may be days when you feel like taking more time to write, and it is fine to do so as long as you don't allow yourself to get burned out.

Whenever you write, think of your writing output as a draft that is in a continual process of getting refined. This means that you can leave it quite rough without smoothing the edges for a long while. The less you approach writing in a perfectionistic way, the better your writing will be in the long run.

Accountability is key in helping you keep up this kind of habit. As long as your life is going well, you may not think you need it. But being accountable to others will help you get through the rough spots where your motivation may wane. Similarly, guidance and support at crucial times will help you stay on your path or correct course as needed.

Why Hasn't the Academy Done More to Help Scholars Become More Prolific Writers?

It makes sense that academic institutions would put money and resources into help-

ing their scholars write and research productively and creatively. A lot of effort, time, and money is put into hiring and acculturating each faculty member. It's a sad loss if a faculty member who is well liked in a role as teacher, mentor, committee member, or administrator doesn't get tenure because of an inadequate publication record.

Some universities provide a dedicated writing space, usually reserved for once-a-week sessions. Or they might offer boot camps in which participants do intense writing in a limited time frame. A boot camp provides the comfort and motivation of writing with a group of peers and helps participants realize that they *can* write productively when they schedule their writing. These two methods may be counterproductive, however, because they send a message that it's fine to postpone writing until a big chunk of time is available.

Another option is to have a speaker give a seminar or a workshop to teach the sometimes counterintuitive precepts of productive writing. Departments, faculty development centers, or provost's offices can help, by providing basic instruction for avoiding years of procrastination. If an institution doesn't provide this kind of learning, it may be available in a bookstore or online. My own Web site, the *Academic Writing Club*, provides most of what you need to develop and maintain a productive writing habit. Sometimes departments or grants can cover the cost of this kind of writing help.

This information is valuable, but it's just a first step. Over the years I have found that professors need almost daily support to develop and continue these new habits. Instruction alone won't instill a habit or support writers when they're highly anxious or avoidant.

I've noticed that many academics adhere to outdated and possibly misogynist viewpoints about writers and the academy in general. Sadly, newer generations of academics have absorbed some of this

thinking and apply it to themselves in a self-flagellating sort of way. One outdated belief is "Either you've got it or you don't." While most academics would admit, if asked, that this is a silly belief, they still act as if it were true: "If you were not born knowing how to be a prolific writer, then maybe you don't belong here in the first place." Why bother helping faculty members who just don't have what it takes?

Another prevalent attitude is "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." In other words, there is no place here for weaklings who get worried and anxious or who are traumatized by vicious criticism of their work, bullying, and lack of support when they are struggling to write. This attitude engenders a sense of shame among academics who are unhappy with their writing. I'd estimate that about eighty percent of the thousands of academics who've joined my membership site select to be anonymous. My site employs accountability methods that have been used by companies who serve many other types of clients. Yet it's relatively rare in nonacademic settings for people to choose anonymity when they are getting help being more productive. In other words, academics feel shame that they are not writing more, because of the academic environment of shaming and judging.

The last belief that I'll mention is "Only the fittest survive." Unfortunately, Darwinian thinking about academia doesn't lead to the most intelligent, creative, and collegial people becoming tenured. Those who survive were lucky to have been in supportive academic environments; came from a family that acculturated them to the idea of graduate school and "the life of the mind"; didn't have to work full time or commute from far away in graduate school; had family to support them; didn't belong to a marginalized race or group; were thick-skinned and immune to vitriolic critiques and judgmental, competitive colleagues; had a dissertation

adviser who taught them how to write productively; and knew how to seek out mentoring when needed.

These outdated beliefs contribute to an environment that leads to isolation. The sense of isolation is increased when academics run into difficulty while writing. Because they fear being judged, they don't tell others what they are going through. This silence leads to a feeling that they are the only ones suffering, when in fact several people sitting near one another at the last departmental meeting are all secretly worried or ashamed of their poor publication rate.

Particularly in the humanities, academics tend to be secretive and worry about their ideas being stolen. They work largely in isolation because individual publications are prized in the humanities and will help determine whether someone gets tenure. In the sciences, the need for large groups to work on grant-funded projects builds collegiality and accountability into the processes of writing and creative thinking. There is certainly some competition for the role of first author, but at least science, with its need for collaboration, provides a better setting in which to nurture productive writers.

As an ancient and august institution, academia is slow to change. The schedule of the modern professor is much busier than it was fifty years ago, and there is significantly less support per professor, but the expectations and incorrect beliefs about writing are similar to what they were at that time.

What Can Academics Do to Promote a Writer-Friendly Atmosphere on Campus?

A writer-friendly atmosphere does not mean that everyone is always smiling. It means that there is open communication about the difficulties of writing, that it is acceptable to ask for mentoring or for help with writing, and that it's OK to feel anxious about writing.

I wouldn't wait around for this magic transformation to take place. The only way it can start is with you. Go boldly out and talk about your difficulties with writing. Invite others to discuss this issue. Suggest to someone that you write together in a coffee shop. Create your own writing corner. Ask your department to bring in a speaker or to find the funds for some faculty members to get coaching or to join an online service that promotes writing productivity.

When you're in a position of power, maybe you will be the one to suggest that it's time to reexamine tenure norms and to encourage joint publication in the humanities. After all, while teachers are urging their undergraduates to work in groups because it's the wave of the future, humanities professors continue to struggle alone. Wouldn't publications in the humanities become richer and more refined if cross-disciplinary or intra-disciplinary work was rewarded?

Be active in teaching all graduate students and faculty members the basic tenets of writing productively. Promote the idea that writing is not always easy and that there is no shame in getting help with writing productively. Do this by creating a nonjudgmental, noncompetitive atmosphere: remember that anxiety is the cause of most writing-productivity problems. The more supportive the environment, the more creative and productive everyone will be.

Seek coaching and support for the process of writing. Sometimes the most creative and original thinkers need help maintaining a regular, consistent writing schedule. There are many academic writing coaches available online.

Find a stable place that you can always go back to. On my Web site, I've had many people stay for years, and many more who leave and come back (after all, it's a paid site). There are so many times in an academic's career when it feels like the well has dried and writing comes to a halt. Knowing that there is

a safe place to go to jump-start one's writing can make all the difference.

Getting support to become a creative and prolific writer doesn't have to be expensive or time-consuming. New writing spaces, intense mentoring, or months of being taught how to write productively aren't necessary. More important than those things is having ongoing and long-term support so that scholars can maintain their writing through the ups and downs of an academic year and an academic career.

Academics can learn the techniques of creative and productive writing, find the support they need in their institution or outside its walls, and contribute to an environment

that is positive and that supports writers. Those who are happy with their writing and research will be much more content with their career.

NOTE

1. Although the dissertation is a long-term writing project without short-term deadlines, some academics have structures in place to help them in graduate school, like attentive advisers or writing groups for graduate students.

WORK CITED

Boice, Robert. *Advice for New Faculty Members: Nihil Nimus*. Allyn and Bacon, 2000.