

MAKING WRITING A HABIT

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

Publish or perish: it's a dictum that many in academia have heard, emphasizing the weight of publication in tenure and promotion decisions. We often bemoan external pressures to write, but writing is more than a career move: We can also write to thrive. In higher education, writing frequently, in multiple modes, stirs us to think more cohesively, reflectively, and analytically about our research. Similarly, when teachers at the primary and secondary levels seek avenues to publication, they open a door to sharing ideas with fellow educators, all the while raising their own profile and their sense of professional confidence.

Strategies for success in academic writing focus on making writing a conscious habit, one that we engage in persistently, even on days when inspiration seems out of reach. Often, we will find that inspiration comes *after* writing, not before. Establishing writing as a habit allows us to put each day's glimmer of insight into practice the following day, evening, or weekend — whenever we can carve out time.

Planning ahead for writing time can help keep the habit alive. One idea is to start each academic term with a writing schedule, listing

your commitment to writing at specific times during each week, aligned to specific writing goals. If you are planning a new article on a pedagogical technique, for instance, you first might set target dates for drafting an outline, followed by an introduction, then examples from your teaching, and so on. The key is to write your schedule down and keep it somewhere you can frequently check or adjust to stay on track — whether in a dedicated folder on your laptop, or printed out and pinned to the wall above your desk.

Regular writing will depend on “snack writing,” not “binge writing,” as Rowena Murray and other scholars have explained. Snack writing focuses on using short bursts of time, anywhere from 10 to 90 minutes, which, Murray has shown, makes writing not only less daunting or stressful, but actually more productive in the long run.

This will often mean stopping mid-flow, if needed, so you can turn your attention to other pressing tasks. But, as Nobel laureate Ernest Hemingway concluded, this, too, is actually a more productive writing practice than plowing ahead for pages and pages. As

Hemingway explained, “The best way is always to stop when you are going good and when you know what will happen next. . . . That way your subconscious will work on it all the time.”

A helpful tool in both snack writing and stopping midflow is keeping a writing journal, briefly summarizing what you have written in each session and projecting what you plan to do next. Each time you return to writing, your journal will remind you where you left off, saving precious minutes so you can jump back in quickly and regain your writing momentum.

Structured habits like these are imperative for any writer juggling multiple spheres of work, life, and family commitments — in other words, for all of us.



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