The following collated emails were sent by Jan Allen, Associate Dean for PhD Programs, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Columbia University. During the semester break between fall 2008 and spring 2009, she sent these out daily to support students and faculty who were writing while school was not in session.
Break Writing #1: Write Every Day

All of the advice we offer in these postings may not work for you -- but this one will:

Write every day. Write something. Every day.

Easier said than done, right? Here are some suggestions for making it happen.

(1) Commit to writing for 15 minutes a day. No matter how tired or busy or even sick you are, write 15 minutes a day. Here’s why this works:

* The hardest part of writing is getting started. We amateurs procrastinate minutes, hours, and days. (The pros – some of the best, most prolific writers – report procrastinating weeks and even years.) We’re afraid we won’t have anything to write. We’re afraid that what we write sucks. We’re afraid we’re not up to the real pain that good writing requires. For some, only when the pain of what we would lose by not writing -- fellowships, degree completion, book contracts, our jobs – begins to feel more real than the pain of actually writing do we even begin to write.

* If you make yourself write 15 minutes a day, you have overcome the biggest hurdle – getting started. And I’ve never known anyone with the goal of writing 15 minutes a day who actually limited writing to just 15 minutes. Once you start, I promise you won’t watch the clock. You’ll write for 30, 60, even 90 minutes before you realize it.

* Writing everyday contributes to the continuity of your thinking and generating the ideas you need to write. Your mind will function differently when you write every day. We all **think** about our writing every day. But the cognitive processes involved in writing are different from those involved in thinking. You move your project forward when you write...even if your writing is a crappy first draft. (Writing the crappy first draft is the topic of our third posting.)

(2) Anne Lamott in *Bird by Bird* (1994) suggests this: Place a 1-inch by 1-inch picture frame next to your computer. You must write enough each day to fill the picture frame. With this method, you **will** finish your dissertation. (You’ll finish faster with an 8 x12 picture frame.) But you must write everyday, and the picture frame reminds you to do so...at least enough each day to fill the frame.

(3) Others have offered this advice: Don’t allow yourself to do something you enjoy until you’re written an hour (or more). Don’t eat. Don’t shower. Don’t allow yourself to brush your teeth until you’ve written something.

So commit to write each and every day during the break. If you’re away and without a computer, then use pen and paper. But commit to writing everyday. (And if you think the 15-minutes-a-day sounds like Writing for Wimps, and you never have any trouble getting started, then commit to writing an hour or more each day.) If you haven’t written for at least 15 minutes today, **start right now**.

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Some of the information in the BreakWriting postings are drawn from previously published work (listed below), and I have tried to properly attribute the ideas and work of others. If I have failed to do so, please let me know so I can clarify and correct (ja2310@columbia.edu).

Break Writing #2: Scheduling Your Writing

In posting #1 I encouraged you to commit to writing at least 15 minutes each day. Everyday without fail...at least 15 minutes.

But you should know that others take a different approach and advise that you set a regular writing schedule. Zerubavel (1999) suggests that you establish “a regular schedule that includes just forty-five minutes of writing every Tuesday and Friday morning, for example....By allotting to writing a specific (daily or weekly) time slot, a schedule ensures that you will indeed get to do it on a regular basis” (p. 5). Silvia (2007) advises you to make a schedule and stick to it. “The secret is the regularity, not the number of days or the number of hours” (p.13). You can write only on Fridays from 8 to 12 (a.m. or p.m. – your preference). You can write each weekday at 9:00 p.m. But you must stick to your schedule.

If this works for you, then use this strategy. In fact, do some of you write too much? (I didn’t think so, but I thought I’d ask.) Zerubavel suggests that having a regular schedule “also helps ensure that our involvement in writing would not somehow take over the rest of our life. In providing our writing with some structure (and therefore also some limits), it helps us make sure that we would also get to do on a regular basis other things besides just writing and thereby lead more well-rounded, balanced lives” (p. 7). So if that is you, then set a schedule and stick to it.

But I persist in advising you, even insisting, that you plan to write at least 15 minutes (or an hour) each day. Here’s why: Many of us as graduate students and as faculty find that we have very little control over our schedule. Something more urgent or more important regularly occurs at just the time we scheduled for writing, and we find that we missed our scheduled writing time. “Oh, well, there’s always the next time, the next day, the next scheduled writing period.” But we’ve lost a day of writing. We’ve lost continuity. We’ve lost the chance to generate the ideas that occur only when we actually write. But if you are writing every day, no matter what occurs, you know that before you finally call it a night, you MUST write for at least 15 minutes. If you get that 15 minutes done at 5:30 a.m., or noon, or 4:00 p.m., then great. You’re done. But if it’s midnight, and you haven’t written yet today, then no matter how exhausted you may be, you must write for at least 15 minutes. No excuses.

(Another problem with scheduled writing periods is that when we have missed too many of them, we try to make up the time by binge writing. A subsequent posting will focus on the dangers and ineffectiveness of binge writing, but for now, let me just advise...don’t do it.)

Silvia and I also differ on this issue related to a writing schedule: His regular writing period includes more than just writing: You can read, collect data, gather resource materials, organize or analyze data, etc. These are all essential tasks; all writing has necessary preliminary work. But in my personal experience and in working with hundreds of graduate students, my/our problem is not the preliminaries. We always manage to read one more article or make one more visit to the library or archives or research site. We can always spend (waste?) countless hours organizing our work.

The hard part is writing. Fingers to keyboard. Pen to paper. Getting our ideas from mental representation in our brain to actual representation as words on paper. So if you need to make a commitment to the preliminaries to writing, do so. But your writing time should be just that – writing. You must write every day for at least 15 minutes. Have you written today yet?
Some of the information in the Break Writing postings is drawn from previously published work, and I have tried to properly attribute the ideas and work of others. If I have failed to do so, please let me know so I can clarify and correct (ja2310@columbia.edu).

Silva, P. (2007). How to write a lot: A practical guide to productive academic writing. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. [Last year we gave away copies of Anne Lamott’s Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life at our GSAS writing and publishing workshops. This spring we’ll give away copies of Silvia’s book. It’s very good.]

Break Writing #3: Crappy First Drafts

I hope you have been writing for at least 15 minutes each day of the break. And by now I hope you have a crappy first draft. If not, we will start to hate you. Anne Lamott describes it this way: "I know some very great writers....Not one of them writes elegant first drafts. All right, one of them does, but we do not like her very much. We do not think that she has a rich inner life or that God likes her or can even stand her. (Although when I mention this to my priest friend Tom, he said you can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.)" (Lamott, 1994, pp. 21-22).

By the way, throughout these postings I'll quote Lamott and others, and I'll recommend some good resources to help you with your writing and editing. But please note: Reading about writing does not count as your 15 minutes of writing. Organizing your desk does not count as writing. Reading, typing, and editing your notes do not count as writing. Not even composing mentally while you wash the dishes constitutes writing. Writing is fingers on keyboard or pen to paper and producing. Even producing crappy first drafts.

Recall that one of the obstacles to writing is the fear that what we write will be terrible. It's a common fear...as common as writing crappy first drafts. Think of them as a necessity. "If you try to write and edit at the same time you will do neither well" (Sides, 1991). You have to write before you can revise and edit to get the draft you want.

Lamott has a chapter called "Shitty First Drafts" that describes the necessity of writing without perfection or editing: "Very few writers really know what they are doing until they've done it. For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts" (p. 22).

She describes her fear of doing even this: "Even after I'd been doing this for years, panic would set in. I'd try to write a lead, but instead I'd write a couple of dreadful sentences, xx them out, try again, xx everything out, and then feel despair and worry settle on my chest like an x-ray apron. It's over, I'd think, calmly. I'm not going to be able to get the magic to work again this time. I'm ruined. I'm through. I'm toast. Maybe, I'd think, I can get my old job back as a clerk-typist. But probably not. I'd get up and study my teeth in the mirror for a while. Then I'd stop, remember to breathe, make a few phone calls, hit the kitchen and chow down. Eventually I'd go back and sit down at my desk, and sigh for the next ten minutes. Finally I would pick up my one-inch picture frame, stare into it as if for the answer, and every time the answer would come: all I had to do was to write a really shitty first draft of, say, the opening paragraph. And no one was going to see it....The whole thing would be so long and incoherent and hideous that for the rest of the day I'd obsess about getting creamed by a car before I could write a decent second draft. I'd worry that people would read what I'd written and believe that the accident had really been a suicide, that I had panicked because my talent was waning and my mind was shot" (pp. 24-25).

That captures it pretty well, right? Many of you report that you are better editors than writers. You find it easier to revise and edit. So you must first write without striving for perfection. "Just get it down on paper, because there may be something great in those six crazy pages that you would never have gotten to by more rational, grown-up means. There may be something in the very last line of the very last paragraph on page six that you love, that is so beautiful or wild that you now know what you're
supposed to be writing about, more or less, or in what direction you might go - but there is no way to get to this without first getting through the first five and a half pages" (Lamott, 1994, p. 23).

[By the way, yesterday I sat down to write my 15 minutes - it was 90 minutes of intense writing before I looked at the clock. Have you written your 15 minutes today?]

Break Writing #4: The Last 5 Minutes

Regardless of how long you write each day, for 15 minutes or for hours, there's one essential task in the last five minutes of your writing that will save time and speed your progress. Five minutes before you stop writing, make a list of your next thoughts and ideas for continuing your writing.

I discovered this recently when I returned to something I'd written a few weeks earlier. My last sentence had been, "There are at least three ways to explain this phenomenon." I had stopped writing there...and subsequently could not recall the three reasons I had intended to describe next. When I finally did complete that section in my manuscript, I wasn't sure I had the same three I had originally identified. Maybe there were really six good reasons. I'll never know.

Recall from the first posting that you use different cognitive processes when you write about your topic than when you just think about your topic. So once you get in the flow of writing, your mind is working in ways that often lead you in the direction you need to go. You can't always know when you sit down to write what you will write. The process of writing brings you there. So after you're been writing, when you must stop, make a list or an outline or use stream-of-consciousness writing* of the ideas that are the likely subsequent steps. The next day when you start writing, review this list or stream and determine if continuing with those ideas is the best way to go.

When we think about the flow of writing, the term "flow" as Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has described it is relevant. "The task at hand draws one in with its complexity to such an extent that one becomes completely involved in it" (2003, p. 40). Can you recall a time when you have been writing and you've gotten "in the flow?" Csikszentmihalyi reports that this flow is accompanied by up to eight conditions. And although he was not specifically describing the experience of writing, most of these eight are clearly what we strive for when we write:

- Goals are clear
- Feedback is immediate
- Balance occurs between opportunity and capacity
- Concentration deepens
- The present is what matters
- You feel in control
- Sense of time is altered
- Loss of ego

For example, when Csikszentmihalyi describes the third one, the balance between opportunity and capacity, he writes: "It is easier to be completely involved in a task if we believe it is doable. If it appears to be out of our capacity we tend to respond to it by feeling anxious....Attention shifts from what needs to be accomplished - the anxious person is distracted by worries about the outcome.... The ideal condition can be expressed by the simple formula: Flow occurs when both challenges and skills are high and equal to each other" (2003, p. 44). "The very experience of flow thus becomes one incentive for growing to higher levels of complexity" (p. 45).

If you've been writing at least 15 minutes each day since we started break writing, I hope you have experienced this flow one or more times already. In this flow, you've likely overcome the obstacles of fear and anxiety and been able to continue to write better and for longer periods of time. If so, let me
encourage you to shift from making yourself write for 15 minutes a day to making yourself write until you experience "flow" - that experience of being totally engaged in all the complexity of your task and you are fully involved and enjoying writing. (If it hasn't happened yet, it will. I promise.)

*Stream-of-consciousness writing is simply writing down as quickly as you can all the thoughts you have about your subject. Don't worry about spelling or punctuation or spacing. Just write down what you think comes next...and next and next...enough to be able to continue your train of thought and ideas the next time you start to write.

Break Writing #5: Stuck?

Almost all writers experience feeling stuck or blocked in their writing. So what can you do if this happens to you? Here are some suggestions:

- A colleague once told me that he suggests to this students: Put your fingers on the keyboard and start typing. Make yourself type, even if you’re just writing “The witch in the graduate school told me I had to write 15 minutes every day so I’m writing. Of course, what I’m writing is nonsense but I’m writing.” Really. Seriously. Start writing/typing. Think about your topic and what you’re suppose to be writing about. “OK, my topic today is philosophical and developmental theories of moral reasoning so I guess I should write about Rousseau and Durkheim and Piaget and Kohlberg. OK, so I’ll begin with Piaget. Piaget is perhaps the ....” You will likely write some nonsense but eventually you’ll get to your good stuff. Or at least decent stuff. You’ll make it better when you get to the editing stage.

- The hardest part of a manuscript, chapter, section, or paragraph is usually the beginning and the ending. So start in the middle first. Once you get the substantive part of the thought you can work on the beginning and end.

- Here’s what helps me get started. If I’m writing a chapter, I first type each heading that seems relevant from beginning to end of the chapter. Then I go back and write in subheadings under each heading. Then under each subheading I write the thought or idea that will become each paragraph. By this time I am likely to have five to eight thoughts and ideas under each subheading. Then, and only then, do I pick a section and begin to write. Doing it this way, I already know where I’m going with each section. This helps because I find that as I write a section, even if that section is going well, I start to feel anxious about the sections ahead. “What if I don’t know where to go next with this? What if I can’t think of anything to write in the next section?” I don’t feel so anxious because I’ve already listed what will be in each section. And because the entire manuscript or chapter already has many ideas and thoughts, I am convinced that this is doable for me. I can do this!

- If you are really stuck, here’s something that works for kinesthetic learners and writers. Get up and move. Pace the floor. Go for a walk or run. But you have to think about your topic while you do this. This is not a break from writing. It’s using movement and physicality to come up with what you need to write. (I had a colleague whose office was next to the school’s track. When working on a manuscript, he’d run a mile around the track, then go back and write a section. Then get up and run around the track again, then write the next section. Another colleague told me that when she was writing her dissertation at the University of Minnesota, she scraped all the wallpaper off her mom’s dining room. Now apparently her mom wanted the wallpaper removed. But Cheryl would write a while, get stuck, scrape a while, and get the next paragraph set in her brain. Then she could sit down and have it flow out.) So if you have a kinesthetic learning/writing style, try this. But remember, moving and running and scraping wallpaper are not writing. You still must write at least 15 minutes every day.

- You’ve been writing for more than 10 days now; how’s it going? Remember, once you start writing, you will get ideas prompted by the process of writing. So don’t be afraid to
start writing each day. Even when you have nothing in your head to write, when you start writing -- the nonsense suggested above or your crappy first draft -- the cognitive processes change when you think and write rather than just think about what you will write. (I started writing a new chapter today and had no idea at all how to start it. No clue or ideas at all even after thinking about it off and on for 3 days (while I was writing something else.) But once I started typing I got three great introductory pages that only occurred to me after I started typing. So really, just start writing.)

(Confession: Since winter break 2007, when we started break writing, I have produced more writing, and more good writing, during the break than I have in a long time. I committed to writing at least 15 minutes a day -- and those sessions often lasted 5 hours once I started. Maybe it’s also because I knew students were writing, too – we were in this together. And this in spite of getting bronchitis that lasted for 7 days as soon as the break started in December 2007. But I wrote at least 15 minutes each day. How could I not after telling you that you must!)

* If you’re stuck, don’t call it writer’s block. “Academic writers cannot get writer’s block....You’re not crafting a deep narrative or composing metaphors that explore mysteries of the human heart. The subtlety of your analysis of variance will not move readers to tears, although the tediousness of it might....Writer’s block is nothing more than the behavior of not writing....The cure for writer’s block...is writing” (Silvia, 2007, pp. 44-45). “Just as aliens abduct only people who believe in alien abductions, writer’s block strikes only people who believe in it” (p.47).

* If you want to read another writer who suggests not 15 minutes a day but 2 pages a day, see below for “The Considerable Satisfaction of 2 Pages a Day.” But remember, reading about writing is not writing. You still must write.

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The Considerable Satisfaction of 2 Pages a Day
By JAY PARINI

I don't care what they say: It is possible to write and teach at the same time. In fact, I have a hard time writing without teaching (sabbaticals are always disastrous interludes for me, a time when I tend to sink into depression, writing more slowly, thinking a lot less clearly). Teaching organizes my life, gives a structure to my week, puts before me certain goals: classes to conduct, books to reread, papers to grade, meetings to attend. I move from event to event, having a clear picture in my head of what I must do next. Without the academic calendar in front of me, I feel lost.

I’ve been teaching for several decades, and in that time I’ve written and edited a lot of stuff, including novels and volumes of poetry, biographies, essays, and reviews. I’m not saying that to brag. I’m too old for that. I simply want to make the point that I like being productive, enjoy writing, and have never found myself without the time to write, even when large numbers of students have required my
attention. I should add that where I work -- Middlebury College -- no graduate students are waiting in the wings to grade papers for me or conduct discussion sessions.

To be sure, I've been fascinated by people like Harold Bloom, who can turn out large and complicated books year after year, for many decades, without seeming to tire. Versions of an old joke, doubtless apocryphal, circulate throughout the academic and literary world. It runs something like this: A student calls at the front door of Bloom's house, in New Haven. He asks to see Professor Bloom. "I'm sorry," says Mrs. Bloom, "but Harold is writing a book." "That's all right," replies the student, "I can wait."

But I'm not Bloom. For me, at least, quantity and quality are not the same. (I often point out to students that Chidok Tichborne wrote only one poem that anybody knows, "Tichborne's Elegy," composed for himself as he awaited execution for treason against Queen Elizabeth I. It is worth a shelf of books by most other poets.) I look on writers like Joyce Carol Oates, John Updike, and Gore Vidal with amazement. Their books arrive in stores neatly packaged, copy-edited and blurred, with the predictability of the seasons themselves. One does view such prolific writers and scholars with incredulity. How do they do it? Do they have an army of research assistants helping them? Should they sign their names, "School of So-and-So," as supervisors of a production line?

As a graduate student, I watched a few of my more prolific mentors carefully. One of them, an extremely productive and original scholar of Greek literature, culture, and language, was Sir Kenneth Dover. His books on Aristophanic comedy, Greek homosexuality, and Greek syntax have proved seminal works. His writing was meticulously researched, thoughtful, and conveyed with clarity and argumentative force. When I was at the University of St. Andrews, in Scotland, in the late 1960s and early 70s, he not only ran the Greek department but also had large responsibilities around the university. I once asked him the secret of his productivity, and he said, without hesitation: "I've learned how to use the odd gaps of 20 minutes or so that occur at various points in the day."

Most of us -- myself included -- waste vast amounts of time. I don't actually mind that. Like Robert Frost, I believe that laziness is essential to creativity; I get a lot done because I have time to burn. I tell myself over and over that there is so much time, so little to do. That means that I feel free, unconstrained, and eager to work when I feel like working. I have learned, like Sir Kenneth, to make use of little pockets of time: the half-hour before dinner, for example. That stretch can be very productive. Weekends are full of time, even when a lot of chores have to be accomplished. I suspect that most of us fail to use the hours of the day properly. We imagine, foolishly, that huge quantities of time are needed to settle into a project, to reactivate the engines of thought.

It isn't really possible to concentrate for more than half an hour without a solid break. That is my experience, in any case. Even when I have the whole day to work, I stop every 20 minutes to make a cup of tea, eat a cookie, call a friend, do a little yoga or a few stomach crunches, shower, or take a short walk. At a certain point in my life I realized that I should not feel guilty about those breaks. (I try not to feel guilty about anything, even when I am guilty.)

Of course it helps to have writing time you can count on. I have gone to a village diner for breakfast at roughly 8:10 almost every morning for several decades. Over coffee and English muffins (with peanut butter), I write poems. Rough drafts, mostly. I have grown used to the chatter in the background, the easy flow of coffee, the local crowd coming in and out. I know most of the people. Many of them wave, nod, or speak to me briefly. A few will sit down for a short time. But they all know I'm working. My notebook is open. I have a pen in my hand. I've made it known in these parts that I write poetry at this diner in the morning, and my friends (and acquaintances) respect that.

A little work every day adds up. That was a concept I got from Updike, whom I heard say (many years ago, in some public forum) that he writes only two pages a day. Two pages a day adds up to a long book every year, even counting revisions. When I'm working on a large prose book, such as a novel or biography, I try to write two pages or so every day. I'm not neurotic about it. Sometimes I don't feel like
writing at all. But I aim for two, and I usually get two. The system works. (And, like Hemingway, I always stop at a point where I know what comes next; that makes getting into the material easier the next day.)

Updike apparently compartmentalizes his writing life. Living in a big house on the North Shore (of Massachusetts), he is lucky enough to have several studies: one for fiction, one for reviews and nonfiction, one for letters and business. He can move along the hall, stopping in for a certain amount of time with a novel, working on a review for a time, an essay for a time, perhaps a poem or short story for another chunk of time. He doesn't teach, of course. It sounds nice.

I would get bored, however, without my teaching. I need contact with students and colleagues, the sense of community. I like the demands of preparation for a class: reading a favorite poet or novelist, skimming a recent critical article. I am afraid that, left to my own devices, I might not reread Stevens, Frost, Eliot, Yeats, and other poets in a systematic fashion, year after year. And they have sustained me, provided spiritual refreshment, furnished the rooms of my mind with decent stuff. I find it very useful to put my thinking about their poetry into words in front of a class.

Sir Kenneth told me that teaching would serve me well. He once suggested that a class and a critical essay are very similar in that each requires powers of formulation; each draws on analytical intelligence. It was T.S. Eliot who said criticism is as natural as breathing, and I believe that. When I read something, I want to talk about it. I want to compare it with other texts. I want to match my own voice with the voice of the text. That is what it means to be a thinking person.

I keep at least two or three projects on the boil at a time. That means I am never at a loss for something urgent to accomplish. I can always turn from a poem to a novel, a book review, an essay. Each genre has its own demands, and I have come to relish the differences. I've taken the same notion and tried to embody it as a poem, then as a story, then as an essay. One can, of course, adapt a notion from one form to another; but I do believe that an idea has a perfect form, and I try to find it.

Teaching, too, calls upon us to move in many directions. There is always a class to prepare, a book to read or read again, a paper to grade, a meeting to attend. I have never in 30 years not had a letter of recommendation urgently waiting to be written. Moving among those tasks, I try to make haste slowly, stopping wherever I am to focus, to give whatever I have to give at that moment. I think I've actually learned how to do that by writing, by having to stare at the page in front of me, the line of poetry breaking at the moment, spilling over onto the next line, the essay in need of a final twist. It is always better to work in small bursts, to focus on the twist or turn ahead.

Having a grand idea, and setting up to accomplish something in a grand way, has always been, for me, a hopeless notion. I once had a good friend, a poetry editor and teacher, who always hoped to write a novel. One day the first sentence of the novel swam into his head: "All of Malaysia was agog." He didn't know why Malaysians were agog, or even where on earth Malaysia was. But he applied for a grant, got it, and set himself up in a foreign country with a huge sheaf of paper and a typewriter. He typed with reverence the great first sentence. He waited. He waited for much of a year, but nothing ever came.

In those circumstances, of course, it never would.

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Break Writing #6: Writing versus Editing

“If you try to write and edit at the same time you will do neither well” (Sides, 1991). If you have been writing for at least 15 minutes each day since the start of our break and break writing activities, you should have quite a bit written. (I’ve completed 30 pages. Thank you very much.)

Soon you can stop writing and begin editing what you’ve written. (I suggest not counting your editing as writing, and on days you edit, be sure to write at least 15 minutes on another chapter or section. Write at least 15 minutes each day, and it really will become a habit that you either won’t or can’t break. This is how prolific writers get it done. Not HOW much each day but definitely each day – write.)

How do you most effectively edit? For me, I move myself from the writing mode at the computer by printing my written work, and then with a pencil, I begin to read and revise. I only start to edit once the writing is complete. I never leave blank passages or incomplete paragraph. I put something there – even if it’s crappy – so I will have something to revise and edit.

What works for you? Perhaps you can edit on the computer screen. It certainly saves paper. (My dissertation was pre-computer days and I typed it on a typewriter. And in my first days as a new assistant professor we hand-wrote our manuscripts and gave to the secretaries to type. When we wanted to make changes, we often determined how much to revise by whether we would need to re-type the entire manuscript or whether we could make the changes and re-type only that one page rather than subsequent pages. I’m sure the final product suffered!) So my most effective way to edit and revise may be a throwback to how much we relied on paper in our writing and editing processes. I also think I edit this way because I like to see several pages – the entire manuscript if I need to – spread out before me as I consider whether to move entire paragraphs or pages within the manuscript. It’s also possible that I like to edit this way because this is also the way I like to read – the paper copy, the printed page. If you prefer reading journal articles, newspapers, and books on the screen, then you may prefer to edit on the screen, too.

There are at least four levels or types of revising you should do:

(1) Examine your writing at a big-picture level – the thesis, conceptualization, persuasive arguments – that form the substance of your writing. This level examines both your thinking and your ability to convey your ideas. One effective strategy at this step is to set aside your manuscript or chapter and think about it as if you were just now starting to outline and write. Because once you have completed this first draft of your chapter, you have more thoroughly thought through your work than at any time before. And the process of writing has caused you to think more deeply or differently about your work. So if you were just starting to write now, knowing what you do now, would you start with the same outline and structure your thoughts and arguments in the same way? Or now, once all your ideas are in words and sentences and paragraphs and sections and chapters, would you structure them differently? What new sections would you add? Which parts aren’t necessary to develop your argument and ideas? It’s now much easier to organize words and sentences and paragraphs than it was to organize your ideas to start writing. So now do another outline and compare it to your original manuscript. If the outline is the same, then this likely confirms a good structure and organization to your work. If it’s different, then decide which is better. Move sections you’ve already written to fit the new, improved outline. This is a good way to think about the work in its entirety – the big-picture level.
(2) Examine your organization and transitions. Do sections need to be moved? Do you need to work on flow – is it logical to move from this section to that one to this one next? Would more headings or headings of various levels help with these transitions?

(3) Word craft your writing – an almost word by word examination of what you wrote: What’s the best word to use here? More adjectives? Fewer adjectives? Make the writing tighter. Stronger. Show more confidence – or less confidence – in the argument and ideas by using the right words, word by word.

(4) Now read for typos and punctuation. Someone once suggested a very good way to do this last step: Read your manuscript backwards, word by word. So for the first edition of a textbook I wrote with a colleague, I read 1200 manuscript pages word by word backwards. When you’re not reading for understanding of the ideas and flow of the material, you can focus only on typos when you read a word at a time without its context. I don’t recommend this backward reading for everything you write as a graduate student or faculty member…just some things.

If you have never read Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*, I encourage you to do so. Who doesn’t recall their suggestion to make your writing more concise, and stronger, with the perfectly worded advice: “Omit needless words” (p. 23)? They also offer these tips:

- Choose a suitable design and hold onto it.
- Make the paragraph the unit of composition.
- Use the active voice.
- Put statements in positive form.
- Use definite, specific, concrete examples.
- Avoid a succession of loose sentences.
- Express coordinated ideas in similar form.
- Keep related words together.
- In summaries, keep to one tense.
- Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end (Strunk & White, 2000, pp. 15-33).

Excellent examples and explanations accompany these suggestions. It’s a quick read – 85 pages – and under $10 for the paperback. Keep and read this book every few years.

How do you edit most effectively? As you’ve no doubt discovered, there are very few secrets or magical tricks to good writing. There are tips and strategies – but you have to determine what works for you. Then use those strategies…every day.


Some of the information in the Break Writing postings is drawn from previously published work, and I have tried to properly attribute the ideas and work of others. If I have failed to do so, please let me know so I can clarify and correct (ja2310@columbia.edu)
Break Writing #7: Binge Writing

Done any binge writing during the semester break? How's that working out for you?

Have you ever been a binge writer? I am, or I was. I try to avoid binge writing now because it's ineffective and unproductive. But in the spirit of true confession and transparency of my struggles as a writer, I'll share. For many years, at least going back to my early years as an assistant professor (which was 1982, and if you were not even born then, keep it to yourself, thank you), I found it impossible to write much during the week. So I tried to write all day on the weekends. Then when weekends were overtaken with grading papers, writing and grading exams, analyzing data, and writing grant proposals, I would set aside the week of spring break or two weeks of the semester break to write all day long. As it turned out, this didn't work very well. Binge writing, which is saving your writing for big blocks of time or large spurts of often frantic effort, seldom produces lots of writing and can create even more stress and anxiety about writing, or the lack thereof.

What's wrong with binge writing? To start, if you are not writing regularly, i.e., at least 15 minutes every day, there is more pressure to produce lots of good writing when you finally, after a week or month or semester of trying to find time to write, actually start to write. My binge writing would look like this: I would promise myself, after not writing during the week, that I would write from 9 to 6 Saturday and Sunday. So much pressure to produce for these 9 hours, anxiety builds, writing is delayed, more pressure builds, more anxiety, writing delayed. And realistically, what any one mental or cognitive activity can you do well for 9 hours straight? I often would organize notes, do more reading, think about writing, or finish other projects that demanded attention - and 9 hours later, no writing. After weeks, even months, of this, I would calculate how much writing I could have produced if I had written every day for only 15 minutes versus my failed attempts at 9-hour writing days once a week.

Another problem with binge writing is the amount of time required to return to the focused thinking and productive writing when there is so much time between writing efforts. Recall Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of flow. I firmly believe that writing every day allows us to more quickly and regularly reach this flow with less of the fear that accompanies writing. Without flow, "Attention shifts from what needs to be accomplished - the anxious person is distracted by worries about the outcome" (p. 44). Focus on writing every day and less on the outcome...and you'll accomplish the outcome you seek.

Paul Silvia, in How to Write a Lot (2007), offers another reason not to binge write: "Motivated by guilt and anxiety, binge writers don't find the process of writing rewarding. Because of the long binge, the writing period is followed by a burnt-out haze that confirms the binge writer's distaste of writing (p. 128-129). (Silvia credits Kellogg (1994) with the term binge writing, if you want to read more.)

So if you are binge writing...and feeling the pain, then commit instead to writing at least 15 minutes each day for the coming week. Then see how that works out for you.

Break Writing #8: Time Management

*Time is that quality of nature which keeps events from happening all at once. Lately it doesn’t seem to be working.* ~ Anonymous (Ailamaki & Gehrke, 2003).

I’ve suggested repeatedly that you should write every day. How do you find time? Well, how do you find time to do the other things you do every day? Eat. Sleep. Physical hygiene. (Enough said.) Even mental hygiene. You do these everyday because you have to. Because they are important. So is writing. It’s important. And you have to...if you intend to finish your degree, to be a writer, to be an academic. You have to write. So you must find time to write each day, perhaps for no more time than you spend eating or brushing your teeth (at least twice a day, right?). Some of us struggle to find even that 15 minutes. Here are some suggestions that might help:

1. Brause, in her book *Writing your Doctoral Dissertation* (2000), suggests that you make a checklist of all the steps you need to complete your paper, manuscript, thesis, or dissertation and develop a plan according to the time needed for each step. It’s good advice. In my first few years as an assistant professor, I worked with a dozen students who were writing their theses and dissertations. I asked each student to make a list of the major steps in their research and writing and to predict how long it would take, so they could make a plan for completion. After each student finished the thesis, I asked another question: “How long did each step actually take you?” Invariably, for all the students the entire process took twice as long as they had anticipated. A four-month plan became eight. A 12-month plan became two years. Why? You likely know: Some things just take longer. Some steps, particularly the ones the students were doing for the first time, i.e., every single piece of the thesis or dissertation, were scary so the students didn’t start working according to their plan schedule but started only once they were not afraid to attempt the next step. And even when the students kept on schedule, their advisor (me) and their other readers (my colleagues) often took longer than planned to read and return their chapters with comments. (Research and data collection take longer than anticipated. The more elements that are out of your control, the more surprises that can occur.) So my advice is to make a plan that has enough flexibility that you can adjust it when things take longer than you anticipate (and they will) without suffering dire consequences. Dire consequences? Like your funding runs out, your housing lease ends, your spouse/partner threatens to leave you, your advisor leaves the university or (heaven forbid) dies. One other tip for making your plan and schedule: Set your own deadlines in advance of your advisor or publisher imposed deadlines. Then when things require more time, you are facing your own wrath or disappointment, not the wrath and disappointment of others.

2. Allen (2003) emphasizes the importance of making this list, in writing, no mental lists, when he points out the inefficiency of psychic RAM. “If it’s on your mind, it’s probably not getting done” (p. 26). “Your head is probably not the best place to keep something in a trustworthy fashion....Left only in the mind, these self-commitments create infinite loops that make no progress and produce inner conflicts and stress. As soon as you make any sort of commitment with yourself, not completed in the moment, your mind will demand and take psychic energy until it’s resolved. ‘I need milk’ and ‘I need to decide whether to buy this company’ both tie up space in psychic RAM” (p. 27), he preaches to corporate executives. In our situation, our memory is filled with the details of “check citations for first section, rewrite intro to chapter two, find more methodological citations, develop transitions to insert at three critical junctures in chapter four.” Add it to your checklist. I recall my recent revisions for a book, now in its third
edition. The citation title was “Trials of Childhood.” Or was it “Trials of Childhood.” I looked it up three times, not from any obsessive compulsive disorder, but because I didn’t write it down on my list and every time I read that citation my psychic RAM could not produce the resolution of whether it was correct or not. So make a list of next steps for your work, then keep the list after you’ve checked everything off so you don’t repeat a step. Whether it’s five chapters or 16 chapters, there’s a lot to remember.

3. Beware of the steps in your writing project that seem to take more time, not because they actually do, but because you did not start early enough on them or work more quickly. This sounds simple. But how many times have you said to yourself, “I’d be done with this darn _______[section, chapter, paper] if I had started a week ago. Or if I had written every day, or if I had written for more than 15 minutes each hour instead of ______________ [your favorite procrastination activity]. Take control of your time and your writing. “If you cannot take control of your time, you will never finish” (Brause, 2000, p. 83).

4. A reminder of Silvia’s suggestion from the second posting: Write regularly (Silvia, 2007). Schedule it on your calendar as if it were a class you were taking or teaching. When I was an untenured faculty member, I would schedule time to write. And when colleagues were trying to schedule yet another committee meeting (area committee, undergraduate committee, curriculum committee, executive committee, mission statement committee, calendar committee – yes, even that, to plan the academic calendar), they would see “research” or “writing” written on my calendar and say, “Oh, you can do your research or writing anytime. We can only meet as a group at [the exact time I had planned to write].” That was so-o-o unfair, manipulative, harsh for a junior faculty member trying to find time to write. What I heard was, “Your time isn’t important.” So commit to your writing, schedule it, and stick to your schedule (Allen, 2009).

5. Kendall-Tackett (2007) suggests you can minimize procrastination and manage your time better if you plan a start and an end time for your writing. Tell yourself that if you start at 8, then you can stop at 9. When the time is up, you can stop…or not, but you must start on time.

6. Kendall-Tackett (2007) also suggests using procrastination to your advantage by planning multiple projects. She describes dreading grading papers (specifically “really dreadful papers”) “Suddenly I couldn’t wait to work on my manuscript. I would tell myself, ‘I’ll just work on one chapter….Before I knew it, I had taken a first pass through two thirds of the book” manuscript due in a few months (pp. 38-39). This works for me. The busier I am the more productive I become. It’s why devoting an entire Saturday to writing hasn’t been a good strategy for me. If I plan to write all day on chapter 17 (and who the heck plans a book with 17 chapters? A perfectionist writing the definitive work, right? Note to self: Save something for the next edition or another book.), I get much less done than if I plan to work on three sections of chapter 17 in the morning, the preface and the appendices in the afternoon, and three sections of chapter 15 in the evening. So procrastinate ONLY if your delaying tactic is working on another writing project or another section of your paper. At least you are writing.

7. Another suggestion from Kendall-Tackett (2007) is the writing cloister (Rogers, 2005). This is time when “you do nothing but write and sleep” (p. 48). You are tough with both yourself and others, especially when deadlines loom. “Banish distractions, have timed writing times and break times, and beware of the hazards, “which are times you can anticipate you will have
difficulties such as when you usually eat, check e-mail, have tea. (So no eating.) This is a hard-core approach, and Kendall-Tackett and Rogers suggest it especially for when you are having some difficulty starting or writing. It’s not a long term strategy, but if for half a day this helps you produce, then try it. [We’re conducting a Dissertation Boot camp here at Columbia this week; I’ll let you know what productivity and time management tips we discover from our experience.]

8. Do you have trouble physically organizing your space and your work materials? This week I’ll share another posting that includes various systems for organizing writing materials.

Please understand that you don’t really have time to write a dissertation, or a book, or even a manuscript today. But you do have time to write a paragraph today. Or a page. Or two. And that’s all you need to do today. (Unless you waited far too long to start, and then maybe you do need to write a manuscript tonight. We’ve all been there.) The more you write today, the faster this will go. The more days you write, the sooner you will finish. And the more you write, the better writer and editor you will become. I promise you.

Break Writing #9: Motivational Tools

“I sit in the dark and wait for a little flame to appear at the end of my pencil.” (Billy Collins)

Poetic, but not very realistic. What if “the flame” does not appear? What if you never feel inspired? Or ready? It’s foolish, not to mention unproductive, to write only when you are inspired or ready. It’s not OK to wait for the flame to appear. It is OK to use some of the motivational strategies below. (Several of these are from Silvia’s book How to Write a Lot, and I’ve borrowed the title of his third chapter to title this posting.)

1. Set, and write on a visible list (white board, paper taped to the wall), very concrete goals. “Write at least 200 words.” “Outline a new manuscript.” “Write the first three paragraphs of the discussion section.” (Silvia, 2007, p. 32). Facing reasonable and specific goals makes it easier to start to write...much more so than having a list that reads “Complete dissertation.” Write a book.” “Develop and submit a successful $1 million grant proposal.” (Remember, you can’t do any of those things today. But you can write three paragraphs of your dissertation or book or proposal today.)

2. Reward your progress. Some of us are adequately rewarded by the satisfaction of completing good writing. (We have an internal locus of control) Some of us need more – tangible, tasty, real rewards. So reward yourself at points through your writing but only after you have completed something substantial. (No candy bar per sentence.) And Silvia reminds us to “never reward writing with not writing. Rewarding writing by abandoning your schedule is like rewarding yourself for quitting smoking by having a cigarette....Don’t lose your good writing habits” (p. 45).

3. To reward your progress you have to monitor it. You might laugh to hear that Silvia can tell you that he writes 97% of weekdays and generates 789 words per writing day. People “give me an odd look, as if I had said that I make quilts out of Bernese mountain dog hair” (p. 40). He prepares a histogram of his writing showing the output in words by month for the year. This is one way to both monitor and reward yourself. If charts and graphs showing your output help you compete with yourself to be more productive (as measured by word count) from day to day and month to month, then try it. Post your bar graph. Share it with your partner or roommate or colleagues. See that “Bernese-mountain-dog-quilt look” yourself.

4. Motivate yourself with stories of how good writers suffer. Ralph Keyes in The Writer’s Book of Hope explains that he keeps a file with such stories: ‘A San Francisco Examiner editor returned an article to Rudyard Kipling with a note saying, “This isn’t a kindergarten for amateur writers. I’m sorry, Mr. Kipling, but you just don’t know how to use the English language” (p. 142).

5. And here’s one more motivational tip from Keyes: Study the acknowledgments section of books. They “can be a treasure chest of useful and reassuring information” (p. 143). Writers demonstrate in their long list of acknowledgements that, through times of AFD (anxiety, frustration, and despair), there were those “who encouraged them, who supported them, and who kept their spirits up” (p. 143). I encouraged my graduate students who were having a hard time starting to write to begin with the acknowledgements. It’s fun and easy to write, it makes the dissertation begin to look like a dissertation or book, and no reader or committee member
will ever suggest edits to your acknowledgements. So if you’re working on your thesis or dissertation and haven’t drafted the acknowledgements, do so. It provides encouragement and inspiration, if that will help. (I’ll admit why acknowledgements motivate me: I remember reading James C. Cobb’s *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*. When I read the author’s acknowledgement of his wife, neither of whom I’ve met, I was moved to tears. Since that day the acknowledgements are the first thing I read when I pick up a book. Like Keyes, I’m always amazed at how many people have helped, encouraged, and sustained the authors through the writing of their books. For me, writing a book’s acknowledgement page means that I get to thank the people who have mentored and inspired me. That’s a real motivation for me to finish the manuscript.)

6. And here’s a good one: Donate $5 to your favorite U.S. presidential candidate’s opponent for each day you do not write (Boice, 1990).

Break Writing #10: One More on Time Management

A person who has not done one half of his day's work by ten o'clock, runs a chance of leaving the other half undone.  ~ Emily Bronte, Wuthering Heights

If you continue to struggle to find time to write, or if you wonder if your time spent writing could be more productive, then read these additional time management tips. Will they work for you?

1. Track your writing time. Try this: Before you begin a new project, or new chapter, or new section of a chapter, think about the work you must do: How much content do you need to cover, what ideas or arguments will you include, how many subsections will you use? Then consider how much time will be needed to produce good writing...on this topic...specifically by you. Write down that amount of time. Then start writing on that section and keep track of how much time it actually took to do what you planned. When you're done writing, refer back to the number you wrote down. (Do you ever finish sooner than you thought? Well, congratulations to you. That's never happened to me.) It always takes longer. The next step is the most critical, the important part of this exercise. Analyze why it took longer. Maybe you took more breaks, ate more snacks, watched more television, or got distracted more often than you had planned. So do you know what action you should take? Identify and eliminate the distractions that prove to be your weakness. (Do not connect to the internet. Do not check e-mail. Turn off your phone.) Or, did you just not give yourself enough time to do this writing task? Do you anticipate that something (really, everything) will be easier and thus quicker than it turns out to be? Do the thoughts make more sense in your head than they do on the paper or screen so you underestimate how much time you'll need to get your mental writing into external, more visible form? Does a project that you believe will take 90 minutes turn out to require double the time? It's OK to be a lousy judge of how much time something will take. It just means that you must adjust your schedule and your thinking about that schedule. How? You must start your project earlier. Give yourself that additional time by starting a week, a month, or more earlier based on what you anticipate you'll need. Or, you can work so much more quickly than you've been working. I recommend the first option. It allows you to retain sanity (not to mention friends and loved ones) and it improves the quality of your work.

2. How much writing would you get done if you were told to abstain from writing, or to write only when you were inspired? Boice (1990) reported on his "writing intervention" with 27 faculty members. All faculty reported problems getting their writing finished yet all had perfectly manageable writing projects to complete. Boice assigned faculty to one of three conditions. Perhaps the most desired assignment was given to nine faculty who were told not to write for 10 weeks except "in case of emergency." Faculty in this "abstinence" group assumed that the 10 weeks away from writing would let them develop more, and more creative, ideas for their writing. Boice told a second group of nine to schedule 50 writing sessions over 10 weeks but to write only if they felt in the mood to write. (Another nice assignment, right?) These "spontaneous" writers also predicted they would experience more creative writing ideas. Boice also told the remaining nine faculty to schedule 50 writing sessions over the 10 weeks. But, if they did not write at least three pages during each of these scheduled times, for a minimum total of 150 pages, a prewritten check signed by each would be sent to an organization they hated. (The Democrats? The Republicans? The NRA? Planned Parenthood?) Faculty in this "expensive contingency" group, clearly having drawn the short straw, predicted that they might be productive but definitely not creative. Know what happened? (Would I be telling you this if it didn't?) The group "forced" to write produced over three times as much as the spontaneous group and over 15 times as much as the abstinence group. By the faculty members' self-report, the third group, forced to write with
an expensive contingency, had a "useful, novel idea" each writing day; the rate was half as often and a fifth as often for the other two groups, respectively. One faculty member, forced to write, said: "It really isn't what I thought it would be. I don't feel the pressure because I don't even think about it very often....It feels good to be so self-disciplined. What I really like, though, is how easy it is to start writing. No struggle. I look forward to it. I think about what I'm going to write during the day. Sometimes I'm tempted to start sooner. That sure doesn't sound like me" [laughs] (Boice, 1990, p. 81).

3. One other suggestion from Boice is this, which may seem counterintuitive if you're having problems starting to write each day: Set limits on your writing. "Start writing before you may feel you're ready. Finish writing before you may feel you're ready. Know when you've done enough with your writing project" (Boice, 1990, p. 86). Boice explains that not waiting until you have the perfect plan and perfect paper in mind and then turning the paper over to reviewers before it's been perfectly written "both teach the values of giving up one kind of control, i.e., wanting to be perfect, for another, healthier kind of control, i.e., being able to work and communicate comfortably, without unnecessary anxiety" (p. 87). Boice offers an interesting take on procrastination - it is a type of limit-setting. When you procrastinate you limit yourself to a flurry of a few writing days rather than writing day after day almost endlessly. "What these procrastinating writers ignore, though, are the aversive properties associated with last-minute writing - fatigue, anxiety, lack of confidence about writing ability, among them" (p. 87). There are healthier ways to set limits, and they result in more productive writing outcomes.

4. So what to do when none of the time management tips seem to work for you? Or you use these strategies and still are so overextended with school and work and life? Try writing when there's very little time to write. I love these examples from Keyes: Perhaps the most commercially successful contemporary fiction writer ever, author of more than 30 books with sales of over 80 million in the U.S. alone, was a widow at age 36 with five children. She wrote from 5:00 to 7:00 each morning for three years to complete her first book (Keyes, 2003, p. 40). The Canadian poet and novelist Carol Shields wrote in between diapering and nursing five children she had in 10 years. When she did not meet her two-page a day goal, she wrote in bed as she was falling asleep each night. "Nine months of two-page-a-day writing resulted in her first novel Small Ceremonies. Shields later observed that she never wrote this quickly again, or in such an organized way." After winning a Pulitzer Prize for The Stone Diaries, she told NPR's Terry Gross, "Now I have the whole day and my output is no more than it was then" (Keyes, 2003, p. 42). Anthony Trollope wrote dozens of novels at night after leaving his British postal surveyor job. Agatha Christie wrote 12 novels in six years while working full-time at a hospital. The Pulitzer Prize winning author of Wit wrote after work at a bicycle shop. An assembly line worker wrote during breaks at the Fisher Body Plant in Flint, Michigan, to start his career that led to the Newbery Medal. Attorney Scott Turow wrote Presumed Innocent during his 30-minute train ride into Chicago each day. bell hooks worked fulltime at the phone company while producing essays. Debra Rienstra wrote her memoir Great with Child in 15 to 60 minute blocks and was so sleep-deprived "that she could not fully remember writing the book. Franz Kafka was a clerk, Herman Melville a customs official, Primo Levi an industrial chemist. T.S. Eliot worked in a bank" (Keyes, p. 44). I don't know about you, but after I read Keyes's description of these successful writers, I would feel foolish saying I don't have enough time to write.


Break Writing #11: Writing Work Space

If you delay your writing because you don’t have a good place to write or because your work space and materials are not well organized, stop it! Start writing. Now.

John Updike is reported to have rooms in his home for each of his different writing projects. He works on a novel in one room with everything he needs for that project. When he stops writing on his novel for the day, he simply moves to the next room and works on an essay. Then to the next room to write a children’s book. Another room for working on a criticism piece or a play. (This is my dream home.) I must stop fantasizing and start writing.

But if you are already writing and want to be even more efficient and productive with better organization, consider these suggestions:

1) Silvia, in his book “How to Write a Lot” (2007), included a photo of his work space (Figure 2.1, “Where I wrote this book”). For eight years his writing chair was a metal folding chair. He wrote one book and 20 journal articles on a $10 particleboard folding table covered with a $4 tablecloth – his “nod to fashion” (p. 20). His writing spaces have included the living room, bedroom, guest bedroom, and bathroom, “there’s always a free bathroom” (p. 21). Silvia has no Internet connection to the computer at home he uses for writing. “It’s a distraction….The best kind of self-control is to avoid situations that require self-control” (p. 22). [This may be the best piece of advice yet!]

2) I just finished reading Stephen King’s book On Writing, in which he offers writing strategies and stories. As for writing space, King wrote Carrie and Salem’s Lot – after teaching in a Hampden (Maine) high school all day – using a portable typewriter and sitting with a child’s desk on his lap wedged into the laundry room of his doublewide trailer. He was earning $6,400 a year, his wife worked at Dunkin’ Donuts, and they had no telephone because they could not afford one (King, 2000). He developed his idea for the novel Carrie while he spent summers off from teaching working at a laundry – where he handled bloody sheets from a local hospital. (Remember the scene in Carrie? A nasty job but a successful story and movie.) King advises finding a room with a door you can shut and then writing at least 1,000 words a day before you open the door. Write everyday; if you must, take one day a week off. (p. 151). (King himself tries to write 10 pages, about 2,000 words, a day.) “Eliminate every possible distraction” (p. 152). King says no TV, no telephone, or video games.

3) Kendall-Tackett (2007) suggests you find a piece of music you can write to, not the same as listening to, but writing to. Then play that song every time you write because it can help signal that it’s time for you to write. (King reports that he found this helpful, having one piece of music to write to, until the day his wife stormed into the room and shouted, “One more time, ONE MORE TIME, and I will kill you!” (This was before the days of the iPod ®.]

4) Here’s my organization system: Well in advance of beginning the writing (because organizing materials is so much easier than actually writing) I designate a box for the project. A shelf on the book case or any semi-protected space will do. (When I lived alone I used the couch and dining room table. Now, my husband often wants to sit down or eat at the table, and my project has to be re-located. So semi-protected space out of the way is good.) Then every time I find an
article or book, or create hand-written notes on index cards or pages, I put them in the box. Soon enough, as my ideas for organizing the writing start to take shape, I make individual folders for the chapters of the book or major sections of the paper and organize the notes and articles according to that scheme. Eventually what’s in the box will begin to resemble the outline of a paper or table of contents of a book. (At that point, it is less scary to start writing.) If you were to look at my box now for “my Head Start book,” (I taught in Head Start in 1975-78, then went back to school for a master’s and then a PhD in child development to figure out what the three- and four-years-olds in my class were trying to teach me about the way children learn and grow and develop.), it’s just a stack of books, articles, newspaper clippings, and one folder with a typed preface, introduction, table of contents, and the book’s dedication. (That’s the fun, easy part, remember.) That project is a good two years away from being a top priority. If you look at the box for my “Catron and Allen, 5th edition textbook,” one year away from the next revision, there are already 16 folders labeled by chapter title, plus folders labeled contract, correspondence, photos, artwork, tables/charts, and permissions. A third project, a chapter I just finished for a book on helping graduate students make the transition to graduate school, had a much smaller box -- a few folders labeled editor correspondence, articles, and Jan’s drafts.

In (inadequate) defense about my contribution to the world’s deforestation, I keep electronic folders, too, and am trying to reduce the paper involved in any of these projects. So whether your system is mostly paper or mostly electronic, figure out how to organize it so you can find and use things. Nothing elaborate. A few more things I do: Carry index cards (mine are color coded by project) for the times that ideas or sentences spring forth and I want to remember them. Although I will write on anything I have with me on the subway, for instance. Once you start writing regularly, ideas for good writing – like sentences or headings or solutions for problematic transitions – will occur to you, sometimes even when you’re not thinking about them. So be prepared – and grateful – for this inspired thinking and write it down. And realize that when a project is done, these files retain some usefulness for a myriad of reasons. Once, I was asked to join a project after the group of co-authors determined they would not finish it by the deadline. I was given some chapters badly in need of editing – really, re-writing – and for no purposeful reason, I copied the original draft I’d been given on blue paper. Then I began to write, occasionally cutting and pasting (no really, cutting with scissors and pasting with tape) the original blue sentences into my handwritten draft copy. Later, when there was discussion of order of authorship, I had a full draft version of the final paper...with three blue sentences. That was all we used of the original author’s contribution. In another joint writing project, one author began to hint that her work was being used without proper credit. We had kept all versions of the drafts through stages of the paper and could easily do the forensic work to sort it out. Even when I’m writing as sole author, I’m glad to have an organization system, a physical rather than mental system, to sort out which references, or quotes, or research goes where, particularly when a book manuscript begins to reach 1,500 pages.

So figure out what works for you and what is possible for you (likely no guest room to turn into a writing space if you live in NYC), and then write. Because King also says that the two principle rules for writing are to write a lot and to read a lot. It’s that simple.

I hope you’ve realized that it’s not about the writing space or how much time you have to devote to writing. It’s about writing every day. It might not even be about talent. Keyes (2003) suggests that the essential ingredient in writing success is drive, durability, tenacity. “...determination is rare, however, more rare than native ability” (p. 49). Writing the
dissertation, with an exacting advisor and multiple readers, might be one of the most challenging tasks a writer can face. But you can do it. And maybe this last story will help you do it with some confidence: My favorite story in Stephen King’s book is his description of the writer James Joyce, clearly in despair about his writing and being comforted by a friend. Joyce explains that he had written only seven words that day. “Seven? But James...that’s good, at least for you!” Joyce’s agonized reply, “Yes...but I don’t know what order they go in!” (King, 2000, p. 146). I know you can write more than seven words today...and in the right order! Go to it.

Break Writing #12: Are You Writing the Perfect Dissertation?

Do you delay completing your writing because you seek perfection? Do you postpone starting to write because you know what you write won’t be perfect? Do you wait for just the right time, right environment, right mood to write? Do you have to be inspired before you start writing?

Hogwash. Just write. Because perfectionism is not possible. And if it were possible for you to write the complete and definitive work, what would you do next? Switch topics for every manuscript you write because each will be the definitive work on that topic? (I’m exhausted just thinking about your writing life and academic career.)

Why are some of us perfectionists? (And when I say “us,” I mean “me,” because I sabotage my writing by my intention to write the perfect article or definitive book each time I sit down to write.)

Our wanting to be perfect can come from

- ...becoming overly attached to the dissertation or writing project. It is a work of scholarship; it is not your life. (It just feels like it.) A dissertation is significant and has implications for successful and timely degree completion, entry into post-doc and faculty roles, and the launching of a body of work and reputation as a scholar. Yes, the dissertation may be the most significant scholarship you will produce to this point. (And jeers to the Columbia faculty member who recently told his students, “Stay in graduate school as long as you can and produce as much scholarship as possible while you’re here, because it’s all downhill in our field after you finish your degree. You won’t get a good job, you won’t have time to research and write, and you’ll realize your doctoral program workload was easy compared to that of a faculty member.”) But the dissertation or any other writing project is not your life and does not define you. Professionally, perhaps. But life is more than your dissertation and academic career. (Make sure there are those in your life who will remind you of this. Regularly.) So don’t become so attached to any one writing project that you can’t finish it...or even start it.
- ...not being cognizant of how long it takes to complete the dissertation or write multiple articles or books for tenure and promotion. Yes, you can take three years to produce your first chapter or ten years to write a book. But not while the time-to-degree clock is ticking or the tenure and promotion countdown has begun. At times, it’s better to get it done and get it out the door than persist in writing the definitive, perfect work.
- ...inadequate guidance from our advisor, mentor, or (for faculty) our department chair. Identify the expectations. What is necessary to receive approval for the dissertation proposal? To get your advisor’s sign-off on chapter four. To meet the P&T (Promotion and Tenure) committee’s standards for retention and advancement? Meet those expectations. Even exceed them. But no one will ever tell you that your work must be perfect. (If they do, let me know. I’m taking names.)
- ...the mistaken belief that if we wait for inspiration to write, the outcome can indeed be perfect. Silvia (2007) describes this waiting-for-inspiration excuse as a “most comical and irrational” barrier to actual and productive writing. “If you believe that you should write only when you feel like writing, ask yourself some simple questions: How has this strategy worked so far? Are you happy with how much you write?” (p.23). “Successful professional writers...are prolific because they write regularly, usually every day. They reject the idea that they must be in the mood to write. As Keyes (2003) put it, ‘Serious writers write, inspired or not. Over time they discover that routine is a better friend to them than inspiration’ (p.49).” (Silvia, 2007, p. 27).
Is Sternberg (1981) describing you with this? “The myth of the perfect dissertation creates problems for graduate students. No dissertation, or for that matter, no book, is ever ‘perfect,’ or absolutely finished. All successful doctoral candidates and book writers can think of ten important changes they would have liked to have made within days after a project’s final defense or press date. But ten changes later, the dissatisfactions would be renewed. I often suspect that after, say, two drafts of a dissertation, further revisions don’t make a thesis better, merely different. One is reminded of Camus’ character in The Plague, who spends his life rewriting the first sentence of his novel – endless versions of horses trotting down the Champ Elysees”(p. 160).

Now if perfectionism or any other struggle is seriously delaying your writing progress and threatening to sabotage your degree completion, I encourage you to make use of Columbia’s WorkBlock Workshop for Graduate Students at CPS or to attend the Procrastination 101 workshop series, also offered by CPS. Both can be very helpful if you are struggling with procrastination, writing, or completing your dissertation. (http://www.health.columbia.edu/docs/services/workshops/index.html). [And you may want to read Sternberg’s chapter seven, “Down in the Dissertation Dumps: How to Get Out,” which offers a “classification of dissertation anxieties and depressions.” The author is a long-time faculty member – formerly at NYU – and one of several dissertation therapists in New York City. I am not recommending you read this chapter. I recommend you write. But if you would like to read this chapter, stop by GSAS in 109 Low.]

There is another reason we may be a perfectionist that has very little to do with making our writing perfect...and everything to do with procrastination. Luey (2004) describes this when she addresses writer’s block: “True writer’s block... is mercifully rare. If you experience it you should seek help from a psychologist. What most people call writer’s block is a variety of minor intellectual or procedural disturbances. One variety of this is the inability to stop fussing about details. You cannot move forward because there are so many little things wrong with what you have already written that you feel compelled to clean them up. This isn’t writer’s block but a form of procrastination; it’s much easier to fix what's written than to create something new. Fight the temptation” (p. 137-138).

If you have not written yet today, get started.

Break Writing #13: Writing Practice

Have you ever considered running a marathon? I have. Considered it. The best plan for running a marathon I can think of is to rest. A lot. Maybe eat. A lot. I’ll need to be well rested and well fed to run that far, especially for the six to eight hours it will take me to finish running 26.2 miles. Or perhaps you could learn to play the piano by giving a concert. Or to ride a bike by entering the Tour de France. Or learn brain surgery by….

Foolish, huh? But that’s what we do when we write. We are given an assignment, and then we begin to write. A paper, a thesis, a dissertation, a manuscript to submit for publication. We don’t train. We don’t practice writing ahead of the big event. We write with the outcome and deadline in mind. Oh, the pressure.

When was the last time you practiced writing? When do you write just to develop better writing? Most of us can’t recall an occasion when we wrote without an assignment or a deadline… when we wrote with no product or outcome as our goal. We write for classes, to complete the thesis or dissertation, to get published, then to get promoted, to get tenure. And with luck and the hard work of writing, we improve our thinking, writing, and editing skills. But we can improve more if we practice writing.

Robert McClintock, the John L. and Sue Ann Weinberg Chair in Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Education at Teachers College, spoke in our GSAS workshop series “A Writing Life: Columbia Faculty Talk about Writing and Publishing.” His discussion of “grappling with the purpose of writing…other than the purpose of finishing the paper, the class, the degree…” made me think about writing practice. Robbie spoke passionately about having both discipline and inspiration to write and suggested that we “practice stylistic writing to help develop habits that are inspired rather than disciplined.” (This is not the same as waiting for inspiration to write, OK? Robbie was talking about producing writing that is inspired. Maybe even inspiring.)

Let me encourage you to choose a day when you have nothing you must write…maybe your last chapter is off to your advisor. Or if you are writing each week day, then choose a Saturday or Sunday. Rather than take a day off from writing, select a topic, perhaps one where you’re not tempted or able to write a dissertation length work. Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development. Gamma matrix arithmetic. Clovis lithic assemblages. The pteropod *Limacina helicina*. Jane Kenyon. The conservative legal movement and the U.S. government. Choose a topic about which you know only one or two pages worth. (That way it’s easier to know when to stop writing.) And there is no pressure – you’ll never publish this. No one will ever read it. If the anxiety of writing something that will be submitted, reviewed, graded, evaluated – and possibly rejected – creates so much stress and turmoil, or just procrastination, for you, then write about a topic you’ll never publish.

After hearing Professor McClintock speak, I decided to practice writing. “I was a 4th Grade Republican” was the title. I began, “When I was nine years old, I asked my mother, ‘What’s the difference between Republicans and Democrats?’ My mom, the less politically-minded of my parents (my dad served on the City Council and even ran for mayor once, two years before his death at age 49 when I was 13), replied: ‘Well, Democrats spend all our money and get us into war.’ I don’t recall another decision in my childhood that I made with more determination than the one I made then and there: I was a 4th grade Republican.” I continued to write my two pages – about the different decision I made in college – a very conservative Midwestern college with Baptist in its name – where, and you can believe this or not, the
faculty helped me learn to think for myself. I wrote about having David Boren as my political science professor – when Dr. Boren was a county judge and adjunct faculty, before he became a governor, a senator, and the longest-serving chair of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. I wrote about the political socialization research I did as a junior faculty member exploring young children’s political concepts and understanding of social justice.

I never had so much fun writing those two pages. Talk about flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The words just poured out. Now why am I telling you this about an essay that I wrote and have revised several times but will never submit or share in its entirety? Because if you still face some fear or anxiety when you start to write, maybe you are not writing enough...in a way that writing can be fun and stress-free because no one has to see it. It’s practice writing. You can revise and play with this writing. It’s just practice. Try it. If you do this regularly, I think you will discover at least two important things. You can, through the work of writing, improve your thinking, writing, and editing skills. And you will discover that you really can write without anxiety and delay, or maybe even in spite of your anxiety. You CAN write. It is possible. Especially when you write every day.

Break Writing #14: Writing Support Groups

As our Break Writing posts will end next week (as I assume your break ended a week or more ago), some of you may want to continue, in some form, with a community of writers.

Two years ago we invited the Break Writers to join us (non-virtually) in a discussion about forming writing support groups within their own department. And last year at Columbia we invited graduate students from four departments (three agreed: Political Science, Psychology, and Chemistry) to work with us through the year to develop and implement department-, discipline-, and lab-specific writing communities that would be most effective for PhD students in that specific program. Here is some of the information we shared with, and learned from, these groups:

What is the purpose of such groups?

*Writing support groups help you to develop and enhance your academic writing and editing skills for class papers, proposals, the dissertation, and publications.

* Working with peers in a group, you set goals and deadlines for your writing, revising, and completing of projects. Your commitment to completing and sharing your writing is a commitment to the group, not just to yourself; you are accountable to others on a regular basis.

*Writing support groups also help you develop skills in offering critiques and feedback on the ideas and writing of others.

*And writing groups help you to know you are not in this writing effort (writing nightmare? writing frenzy?) alone.

What are the mechanics/arrangements for writing support groups?

*Your group can meet every two weeks, once a month, or any schedule of the members' choosing. The more time between meetings, the more ambitious your goals should be.

*Each member agrees to e-mail their writing (a page, a section, a chapter - whatever the goal before the next meeting) to the other members three to five days before the next meeting. The work is read by one or more members who offer feedback - questions, comments, editing. The group can select one or two writing samples for all to read for each meeting or can assign one sample to each member so that everyone's work is read and everyone receives feedback each time. Or design another arrangement that works for your group.

*The group continues to meet as long as it's working for you. New and replacement members are added as the group deems appropriate.

Paul Silvia, in his book How to Write a Lot (2007), describes a writing group formed with his faculty peers. The Agraphia Group (referring to the pathological loss of the ability to write) gave "people a chance to talk about ongoing writing projects, to get others' ideas and insights about writing challenges, and to help each other set reasonable goals" (p. 51). Silvia suggests these five components for successful groups:
1. "Set concrete, short-term goals and monitor the group's progress" (p. 52). Silvia and his colleagues meet every week, so instead of sharing writing, they share their goals. At each meeting, "minutes" from the previous meeting are read and members report whether they met their goals. "Our system prevents people from wriggling out of their goals or having false memories about what they said the week before" (p.52). In Silvia's group, some members can meet only every other week, so they set goals and deadlines that are slightly more long term than the group that meets each week.

2. "Stick to writing goals, not other professional goals" (p. 53). Silvia's meetings are brief, often just long enough for each member to report on progress since the last meeting and then to announce next week's goals. Instead of reading each other's writing, they occasionally read and discuss books about writing. [If you form a writing support group and want to read about writing - which is not a substitute for writing, the last BreakWriting post will be a resource list. Or e-mail me; I'll recommend some books about writing you can borrow for your group's use.]

3. "Big carrots can double as sticks." Silvia suggests being supportive and celebrating progress and success among the group members. "But support groups shouldn't be unconditionally supportive" (p. 54). Don't let a group member consistently fail to meet goals or contribute to the group. Motivate with goading, pressuring, confronting, electric shocks (OK, he was joking about that last one - I think; he's a psychologist, so that's psychology humor.)

4. "Have different groups for faculty and students" (p. 55). Graduate students and faculty have different challenges, priorities, goals, and expectations. When it comes to writing groups, faculty and graduate students don't mix. [You might want to occasionally invite faculty to inspire you, provide some guidance, or share their writing strategies -- but they should not be participating members.]

5. "Drink coffee (optional)" (p.56).

Those of you at Columbia may know that we conducted a Dissertation Writing Boot Camp during the recent semester break. Afterwards, in assessing what was most effective, I learned from the Boot Camp participants that what was most helpful for their writing and productivity was not my sage advice (!) or hand-outs or even tasty food. It was having the **space where other students were also dissertation writing** with a minimum of distractions. Ah, peer pressure, peer support. Community! So we have now reserved Philosophy Hall 301 for at least one afternoon each week for up to 20 students to come and write in the same room. And after two of these sessions, I've gotten feedback that the peer pressure really helps: "You don't want to be the only one wasting time on the internet when you can see that other students are making good progress on their dissertation." (Not in this economic climate and job market, right?!) So if your department does not have writing support groups, consider starting one. Or join us next week to quietly and productively write in 301 Philosophy Hall (pre-registration required on the GSAS home page events calendar).

Break Writing #15: Writing with a Deadline

When are you most productive? Whenever I ask this question of my colleagues, the most frequent response is: "I'm most productive right before I leave on vacation." Or for some it's the last few hours before leaving for a long weekend or before leaving for a conference.

Why would this be anyone's most productive time? Jack Groppel, author of The Corporate Athlete, says it's because you have a deadline. You must be out the door, or on a train, or at the airport by a specific time. And you also know exactly what you must do, your top priorities, for the limited amount of time before departure.

What would happen if you worked like this every day? If you made a list of priorities and then set a deadline for getting them done. Could these short sprints make you more productive?

Few projects are truly open-ended, but they may feel like they are. Write a dissertation. Write a book. Write a chapter of 200 pages. Write an article of 30 pages. We know we can't accomplish that in a day. So we write as if we had the week or the month or the year to finish (which we do).

Let me add: I am not suggesting that you create pressure or anxiety...not more than you already experience. And although some people say they work better under pressure, this pressure and anxiety is not what produces your best writing. You might get decent writing and you might get the work done and submitted. But it's not the pressure that contributes to good writing. It's highly likely that your work would be even better without the pressure and anxiety. When people say they work better under pressure, what they really mean is that they work better with a deadline.

So set your own deadlines. "By the end of the day I will have written 500 words. I will have written five pages. I will write the first section of chapter one." Then set your pace by the available time you have to write and meet your goal and deadline.

Eviatar Zerubavel, author of The Clockwork Muse, writes that when he works with a deadline, he sets his pace by determining how much he needs to write and "divides the estimated length (in terms of number of pages) by the pace (in terms of number of pages a day)" to determine the amount of time he needs to write (p. 69). He estimates that he can write 1 to 2 pages a day, he lists each section of his manuscript by number of pages planned for that section, then he calculates that his book manuscript of six chapters will require 93 days of writing at one to two pages a day. He then prepares a calendar by marking all the days that he knows there will be time to write (by crossing off any days that he knows his teaching or vacation or travel schedule will prevent him from writing. Then he makes himself write on those days, on that schedule, at that pace. (If he writes every day he finishes his book in 13 weeks, if he writes six days a week, he finishes in 15 weeks, if writes only two days a week, then it's 46 weeks to complete his manuscript.)

Does this plan of scheduling and deadlines work for you? Can you stick to this kind of schedule? It's another strategy for you to consider.

I do suggest that you try working with your own, internal deadlines and see what it does for your productivity. It may help you to reduce procrastination, avoid excessive writing or editing, and help you get the first draft, or the last draft, out the door.
Break Writing #16: How to Think and Act Like a Writer

Do you think of yourself as a writer? Or are you just a graduate student who must write to complete the requirements for your degree, to get published, to get a job? Are you a faculty member who must write to keep your job, to get tenured, to get promoted in your job? It might help if you start to think and act like a writer. Here’s how:

1. It’s simple. You must write. You can also think, worry, read, fret, take notes, agonize, organize your materials, worry, buy a new desk, fret, sharpen your pencils, agonize, wash your dishes, did I mention worry, eat a snack…but this is not writing. You must write.

2. And you must want to write. Not to finish, or to publish, or to get a job, or to receive approval or affection or recognition…but to write. You must think, “I really want to write today and will create all opportunities to do so, rather than avoiding all opportunities to do. I am writing today to write. I am writing today because I want to write.” So all you have to do is write. You don’t have to finish. Or meet a deadline or goal. You just have to write. It’s freeing. Don’t wait until you’re ready. Don’t wait until everything else is done. Don’t wait until you are well rested. Don’t wait until you’ve read every book or article on the topic. You never will be all these things. You will never do all these things. If you wait, you’ll never write. Or be a writer. Writers write. (On some of your writing days you will have deadlines so that you will get finished. Those days may not be your most creative. You may not generate new ideas or discover new directions for this or future work. So this if why you must write on those days even when you don’t have a deadline. Every day. Writers write.)

3. Writing is hard. Chances are there is nothing wrong with you if you find writing a challenge. Even the very best writers say it’s hard. You’re in very good company if you find writing hard. So don’t not write when you find it hard. For most of us, that’s an essential part of the process.

4. Commit to writing at least 15 minutes a day. Find what works for you. Write in the morning. At night. On the laptop. On paper. Your forearm. Lamott (1994) commits to writing enough each day to fill a 1”x1” picture frame. Writing everyday contributes to the continuity of your thinking and generating the ideas you need to write. Your mind will function differently when you write every day. We all think about our writing every day. But the cognitive processes involved in writing are different from those involved in thinking. You move your project forward when you write.

5. Write. Don’t edit. (Yet). “If you try to write and edit at the same time you will do neither well” (Sides, 1991). You have to write before you can revise and edit to get the draft you want.

6. Try to get in the “flow.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 2003). “The task at hand draws one in with its complexity to such an extent that one becomes completely involved in it” (2003, p. 40). The process of writing as well as the outcomes differ when you think and when you write.

7. Good writing takes a long time. To write, edit, revise, you must start early. You must not procrastinate. Here’s the dilemma: When you delay your writing until you finally, absolutely must start, you often only then discover that the actual writing is not as difficult as the fear of
starting to write. But you no longer have the time you need to produce the excellent work you now know you are capable of. Give yourself time... when not much is on the line.

8. You will become a better writer the more you write. Drafting, even editing, will occur more quickly. After you begin to think like a writer, and act like a writer, you may begin to think like an editor as you write. But it may never get easier. Sorry about that.

Break Writing #17: Writing Resources

This last posting includes a list of resources for academic writers; some of these are especially helpful for graduate students. We also want to wish you much success in your writing and completion of your degree program. Stay in touch!

Writing Resources
Break Writing 2008-09

The thesis/dissertation

Journal publication

Grammar and Style

Writing Strategies and Advice


**On Writing**


