

Monday, June 6, 2022

Writing Is Thinking

Last week's column ([Writing Rocks](#)) generated a whole lot of emails! We're guessing that the outpouring occurred because naming what's underneath our resistance provides a sense of relief: we are not the only ones who experience debilitating perfectionism. Knowing that it is a common problem among academic writers helps to normalize the discussion of our unrealistically high expectations and to work toward compassionately adjusting them. We were also pleased to hear that many of you experienced important personal insights by trying out the suggested strategies. And given that perfectionism is just one of the demons that underlies our [resistance](#) to writing, we should keep moving forward. This week, we want to describe a problem that is also very common but rarely discussed -- **disempowerment when it comes to writing**.

Many of us hold an incredibly limiting set of beliefs about the writing process, the relationship between our thoughts and the physical act of writing, and what it takes to sit down and write. When we ask people to describe their writing process, what often surfaces is the idea that writing is what happens AFTER they have read everything there is to read, clearly and thoroughly worked out an idea in their heads, and have large blocks of time to empty a fully-developed idea onto the page (or into the computer). In other words, "writing" is simply the physical act a scholar engages in after she's gotten everything figured out internally. Hand-in-hand with this exclusively mechanical understanding of writing is the sense that particular emotional states are a prerequisite for writing. In other words, people frequently tell us they need to FEEL _____ (inspired, excited, energized, confident, clear, etc.) before they can sit down and write. As you can imagine, people who need to feel perfectly inspired and have a fully formed article in their head before sitting down at their desk rarely write.

We're describing this as problematic for three reasons. First and foremost, it's a highly inefficient way to write and often provokes anxiety. That's because you don't know when inspiration is going to strike, and you can't

control it. So if you're sitting around waiting to feel inspired to write, it's no surprise that you might experience some anxiety about writing. Secondly, if you're on the tenure track, the length of time between completing a manuscript and its publication is just too long for you to abstain from writing until you've figured everything out AND feel inspired. Finally, and most importantly, when we set a broad array of conditions that are beyond our control for what must occur before we can start generating pages, it reveals a deep sense of disempowerment, distrust, and confusion about what happens when you write. In other words, it suggests that writing controls you when in reality, **you control your writing.**

"Writing IS Thinking!"

Kerry Ann once attended [a conference for faculty developers](#) that rocked her world! It was exciting to learn about the newest research on faculty productivity and inspiring to meet the energetic, knowledgeable, and infinitely resourceful set of practitioners who work with faculty on campuses across the U.S. She attended a great workshop led by [Joanne Cooper and Dannelle Stevens](#). She remembers Dannelle (a walking ball of energy!) getting very animated when some faculty members described writing as what we do after our thinking is complete. As a response, Dannelle exclaimed "NO! Writing IS thinking!"

At first, we couldn't get our head around the concept that writing IS thinking, but we have since come to believe that understanding the fundamental truth of this idea is the key to overcoming disempowerment. If writing is thinking, then you don't have to wait until you're done reading, analyzing data, or figuring everything out to do it. You can write before, during, and after the research process. In fact, it's the best justification for daily writing imaginable because writing every day enables you to think about your project, generate new insights, and move forward **every single day!** It also eliminates the need to feel any particular way as a prerequisite to writing because you can think about your project if you're happy, sad, inspired, or flat-out cranky. Finally, it lowers the bar and puts you in the driver's seat. If writing is thinking, then it feels a lot less scary to sit down for at least 30 minutes every day. We don't have to produce a perfect first draft, we don't

have to capture a sophisticated argument on the first try, and we don't have to generate elegant prose -- We only have to get our half-baked ideas onto paper. Once they are on the page, we can see them for what they are and proceed to question, massage, and play with them while remaining perpetually open to the surprises that occur when we're actually engaged in the writing process.

Now that we've described the big picture, let us suggest some specific strategies that may allow you to release yourself from any flawed beliefs you have about writing. They will help you to sneak around your resistance and slowly but surely ease into daily productivity.

Commit To Daily Writing

We know we say this every week, but it bears repeating -- if you're not writing, block out at least 30 minutes every day, Monday through Friday, for writing. Don't just say you'll do it. Really try it for two weeks! And don't forget to build in some [accountability](#) because trying to start a new habit alone is a recipe for misery and isolation. Whenever we work with people whose resistance comes from feeling disempowered about writing, we ask them to write every day for at least 30 minutes. When they consistently write every day, they are astounded to learn that: 1) they can write no matter how they feel; 2) a lot can be accomplished in a short amount of time, and 3) it's deeply and intellectually satisfying to be touching the work they love on a daily basis.

Expand Your Understanding Of What "Counts" As Writing

We get lots of questions about what types of writing are acceptable during your daily writing time. If the pen is moving on the page (or your fingers are on the keyboard), then you're writing. Drafting a manuscript "counts," but so does freewriting, generating field notes, editing and revising, outlining, mind-mapping, describing a new idea, preparing a bibliography, consolidating reviewers' comments into a list for revision, etc. In other words, anything that helps move a manuscript out the door "counts" as writing. Expanding your notion of what writing is will help you to reduce your

resistance by making daily writing feel like a regular part of your everyday routine.

Freewriting

We think freewriting has a bad rap among academics. We often hear people demean and belittle freewriting as just "writing about nothing." But, according to Dannelle Stevens, the reason it works is that the initial writing "clears the dust off the road" and brings our attention to the task at hand. When we shift to focused freewriting, we inevitably experience all manner of surprises. So, your job is to get your butt in the chair and the pen moving. Once the writing starts, that's when the thinking (and the creative magic!) happens. If you would like to make a game of it, try Dr. Wicked's [Write or Die](#).

Switch It Up

We're not sure how to explain it, but there's something that shifts in your brain when you move from writing on the computer to good old-fashioned pencil and paper. Many people find it helpful to change the mode of writing when they get stuck. It's really quite simple -- just push your keyboard off to the side, grab a pencil and paper, and start writing longhand through the problem. The changed format and tactile stimulation will help you to think differently. As an example, Kerry Ann keeps a can of markers and a giant newsprint pad next to her desk. When she's stuck, she just lays on the floor with her markers (kindergarten style) and starts mind-mapping. This technique never fails to produce remarkable surprises, and it often generates a breakthrough in her thinking.

Don't Stare At A Blank Screen

If sitting down to write feels scary because you get locked up when you see a blank file on your computer screen, then don't look at it. Turn off your monitor or throw something over it (a sweater, a towel, a pillowcase, or whatever is handy). Remember, you control it -- not the other way around. Then just start typing. Sometimes, just blocking the debilitating image of the blank screen can help you get started, and once you get started the ideas begin to flow. This technique can also help you to separate drafting from

editing (a toxic combination). You can't see what you're writing, so you'll be less tempted to edit it as soon as it hits the page. You can also record your voice talking through the issue and transcribe your chatter as a means of getting words onto the page.

Ultimately, the goal of each of these strategies is to disrupt and undermine the flawed beliefs that writing happens after thinking and that you must be inspired to write. Instead, we're urging you to understand your thinking and writing as inextricably intertwined so that you can quickly begin moving on your summer writing project.

The Weekly Challenge

This week, we challenge you to:

- Write for at least 30 minutes each day (Monday - Friday).
- If you find yourself facing resistance, ask yourself: "What is stopping me from writing?" As a first step, try some organizational [tips and tricks](#).
- If the resistance continues, ask yourself: "What's going on here?"
- If the answer is that you just don't feel like writing, or that you can't write because you're still figuring out your argument in your head, try 10 minutes of freewriting as a way to get started.
- If opening a new document and staring at a blank page intimidates you, turn off your screen or cover it with something.
- If you find yourself stuck during your writing time, try turning away from the computer and writing longhand, recording your voice, or mind-mapping.
- Try joining [a community of writers](#) to support you as you establish new writing behaviors and beliefs.
- Get to know the faculty developers on your campus! They are a tremendous resource to help you teach effectively, publish prolifically, and find some balance in your academic career.

We hope that this week brings you a renewed commitment to your daily writing, a sense of clarity about the connection between writing and thinking, and the confidence to know that you have the power to write every single day this week (Monday through Friday). No matter how you feel or where you are in your project, you can choose to sit down and get started today!

Warmly,

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