

Writing More Evidence-Based and Experience- Based Ways to Increase Writing Productivity for Junior Faculty

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Workshop Goals

- Review and debunk favorite myths about academic writing
- Discuss experiences with Rush Research Mentoring Program Writing Accountability Group

Take home message: You have the power



4 Common Myths about Writing

...and why you shouldn't believe them

1. The myth of the muse

Other versions:

“I need to be in the mood to write”

“I need to feel inspired”

“I need to feel motivated”

Corollary:

“I do my best work under pressure.”

Typical Responsibilities of a Scientist or Clinician-Scientist

Seeing patients

- Writing notes...

Teaching

- Lecturing
- Bedside teaching...

Admin duties

- Meetings
- Sending emails.....

Research

- Collecting data
- Analyzing data
- Lab meetings
- Writing

Which of these do you wait to be inspired to do?

Are you ever in the mood for a lab meeting?

*Writing is no different.
There is no writing muse!
Writing is our job!*

Suggestion: Write a little every day

Schedule your writing in your calendar

- Respect this appointment
- Show up, come on time, come prepared

Write for less time than you think you should

- 30-60 minutes is fine

STOP when your time is up

Result:

- Writing becomes mechanical
- Writing becomes automatic
- You write more* (Boice)

2. I can't find time to write

Other versions:

“I have too many interruptions at my office.”

“I have too many other obligations.”

Corollary:

“I can't write unless I have a big chunk of time. I need at least 4 hours, so....”

Everyone has work challenges

- Clinical Duties
 - Daily schedule varies and can be unpredictable
- No Clinical Duties
 - Having large blocks of unstructured time can be hard to use productively
- Teaching vs. no teaching
- Etc.

Everyone has an outside life

- Parents of young kids
- Parents of teens
- Parents of college kids
- Non-parents
- People caring for elders
- Partnered off people
- Nonpartnered off people
- Etc.

Everyone has the same 24 hours



Is there anything else that you find time to do every day?

- Exercise?
- Read the news?

Why not writing?

Productive writers report the same amount of free time as less-productive writers (Boice?)

How to find the time:

- Look in the right “places” both physically and in your calendar
- Review your schedule
 - Consider tracking your time for a week
 - Make sure that the way you spend your time lines up with your priorities

“I can’t write unless I have a big chunk of time. I need at least 4 hours, so....”

You need less time than you think

Boice: People who write for long stretches (especially unplanned or binges) get less done with more stress than people who write for brief daily stretches.

Why?

- *Don't waste time figuring out where you were.*
- *Writing is less emotionally charged.*

Can you really not find 30 minutes a day?

Try 15 minutes

Try 10 minutes

3. I can't start writing until I'm ready.

Other versions:

“I need to finish collecting all the data”

“I need to finish running my stats/waiting for my statistician”

“I need to finish all the background reading”

Related:

“I am stuck while I wait for my slow coauthor.”

Are you ever really “ready to write”?

Have you ever decided to run another experiment or statistical test after you were “done”?

Have you ever decided to included additional literature after you were “done”?

Suggestion: Start at the start

- Try starting the paper as soon as you have the idea for the project
- Writing throughout the process will help develop and refine your ideas
- You will get more done and waste less time

“Writing is not what you do after you’ve figured it out, writing is how you figure it out.”

-Beth Dunn

Expand your definition of “writing”

Is this writing?

- Freewriting about an idea
- Reviewing notes
- Working on a table
- Entering references
- Writing a cover letter
- Reviewing a paper that you are a coauthor on
- Reviewing a paper for a journal

What can you do before you're “ready” or while you're waiting for that slow coauthor?

YES! Writing is any activity that directly or indirectly causes more lines to appear on your biosketch

4. You don't know where to start

Other versions:

“I've been putting off the _____ because I hate that part.”

Corollary:

“I spent all my time on the _____ because I love that part.”

To Do:

Work on grant

This is hard!

Sometimes we don't write
because we feel overwhelmed

Suggestion: Get an imaginary robot! Program it to complete your goal.



Hello, I' m your
research robot! Enter a
command.

To do:

Finish results section

DOES NOT COMPUTE

Programming your research robot: Tasks

“Finish Results” becomes

- Fill in final group means/sds and p values
 - Open final data file
 - Run descriptives on final study groups
 - Double check ANOVA results
 - Copy means/SDs and p values into document
- Clean up figure 3
 - Make sure that units are abbreviated the same way as in document
 - Increase font size on axes
 - Etc.
 - Etc.
- Etc.



Programming your research robot: Time

❑ Fill in final group means/sds, p values (10 min)

1) Open final data file (1 min)

Can't remember where file was stored? Add 30 minutes

2) Run descriptives on final groups (2 min)

Forgot how groups were coded. Add 10 minutes

3) Double check ANOVA results (2 min)

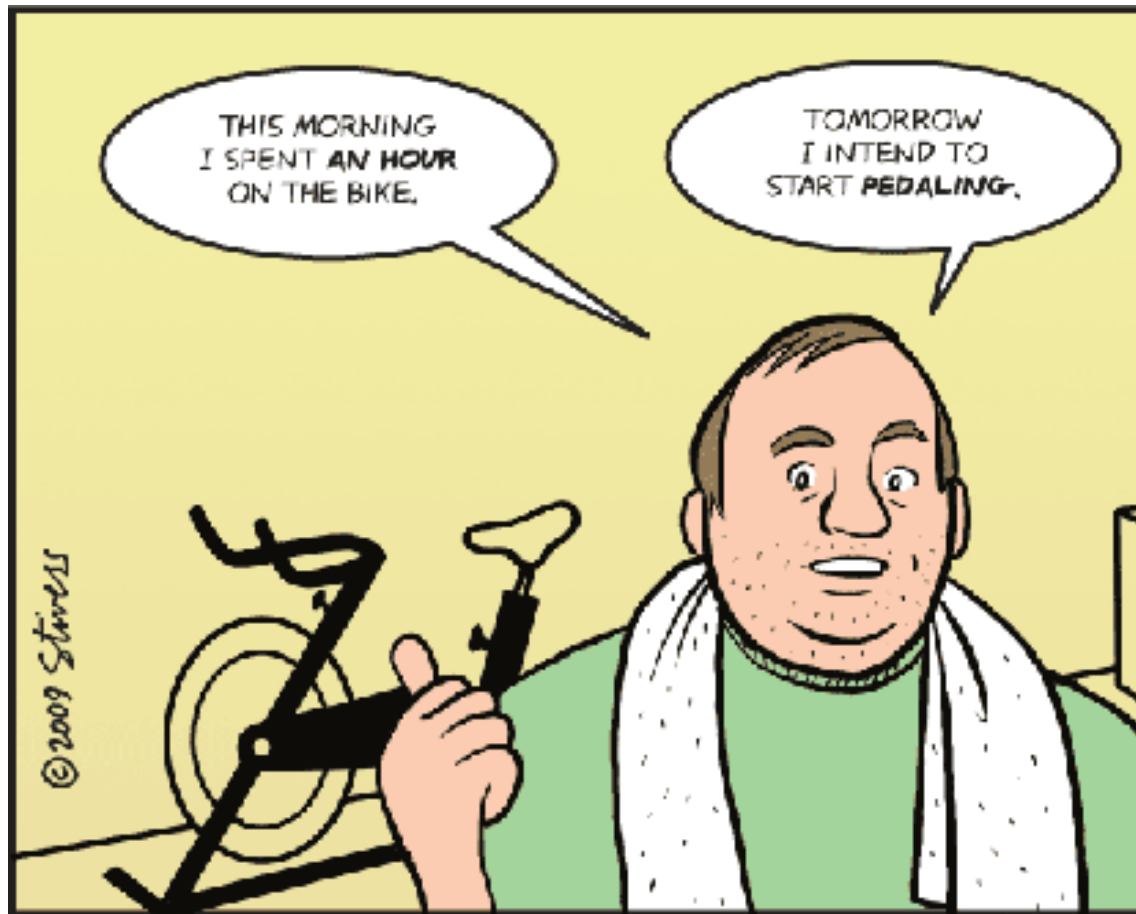
Better re-run the test just to make sure. Add 10 minutes

4) Copy means/SDs and p values into document (5 min)

Programming your research robot: Time

- Your 10 minute task may actually be a 50 minute task!
- Plan for the time each task actually takes, not the amount of time you want to spend on it
- Don't schedule a 50 minute task for a 10 minute timeslot

Changing your writing habits



Why join a junior faculty WAG?

- Having support and accountability increases writing productivity in groups of academic researchers
- Why only junior faculty:
 - Junior faculty tend to lack peer interaction and support
 - We face different pressures and challenges than our mentors
 - We face different pressures and challenges than our students

Format*

- 10 week sessions
- One hour each week:
 - 30 minutes discussion
 - Sharing accomplishments from the previous week
 - Sharing barriers and brainstorming solutions
 - Setting goals for the next week
 - 30 minutes communal timed writing

*Evaluate and adjust to suit the needs of the participants!!!!

Participants: Forming a Cohesive, Supportive, Respectful Community

- 4-6 per session (please be on time)
 - Preferably from different departments
 - Mix of roles
- Be able to attend at least 7 of the 10 meetings for the session that you join

Participants: Forming a Cohesive, Supportive, Respectful Community

- Must agree to share/set writing goals
- Commit to scheduled writing (preferably daily)
- Respect privacy



Worked great/Worked less great

Worked great

- Community
- Sharing tips, tools, and crazy ideas!

Examples of ways RRMP WAG participants incorporated daily writing:

- Writing for an hour at home before coming in
- Write for 30 minutes in morning before checking email
- Dictate notes for a paper after dictating clinic notes
- Team up for daily accountability
- 15 minutes after the kids in bed?
 - Use this time to clean up references?
 - Only if you plan/want to!
- Deciding not to write while travelling

Worked great/Worked less great

Worked Great

- Community
- Sharing tips, tools, and crazy ideas!
- Support for other aspects of junior faculty life

Worked less great

- Grants → separate group
- Clinicians have a special set of issues and concerns

*Evaluate and adjust to suit the needs of the participants!!!!

Online groups

Drop-in only group

Extra hour of free writing

Celebrations!!!

You have the power



- Realizing how much time you have (or don't have) is powerful!
- Realizing that you can choose how you spend your time is powerful!

You have the power



Own your choices

- Choose to make writing important
- Know when writing is not important

Writing is just a job

- Do your job every day
- De-emotionalize the process

SUMMARY

- Prioritize writing!
- Schedule your writing
- Write early and often
- Be your own research robot
- Know how long things actually take and give yourself the time you actually need
- Join a writing accountability group!

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Resources

- **Books**

- How to Write a Lot by Paul Silvia (2007)
- Advice for New Faculty Members by Robert Boice (2000)

- **Blogs**

- www.theacademicladder.com
- <http://getalifephd.blogspot.com/>
- <http://chronicle.com/blog/ProfHacker/27/>

Questions/comments

Feel free to contact me!

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