

Beyond write every day: A sustainable approach for early-career writers

ROBYN THOMAS PITTS

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“Just do it” is a popular Nike slogan that inspires people to take action by overcoming obstacles. It constitutes poor writing advice, yet most of us learn to write by just doing it: one learns by doing through course- and field-based writing, and students can even take the initiative to translate course papers for publication. Aren’t recent graduates ready to write up their research independently—even if they do so in the margins of other endeavors?

Constance sighed deeply as she opened her dissertation, attempting to begin translating it into three articles for publication, but hopelessly unclear on how to start. She was trained to do this, right? She had passed her classes, and everyone said she’d done well on her research, but the experience had hollowed her out, and all she could see was its imperfections and her own inadequacies, real or perceived. If she couldn’t figure this out, was she qualified to write for an audience of research peers? What if she’d just been lucky?

Caleb stared at a blinking cursor, feeling the pressure of looming deadlines and partial ideas unfinished on the page. He felt paralyzed by the weight of his research plans and the persistent feeling of being behind on what he should have achieved by now—not to mention his other work responsibilities. No one said it would feel this daunting to get ideas out of his head and into words, much less coherently and compellingly. He felt perplexed; what to do...?

Itzel finally found time to write. After refreshing herself on research notes for a couple of hours, she took a stretch, checked her email, and sent a few quick replies. She grabbed lunch, checked her phone, and saw the headlines before returning to her desk. Left open from earlier, her email had boomeranged a response. When she returned to writing, she felt disengaged, energy-sapped, and unmotivated, so she searched for another four-hour writing block and emailed her coauthors about the delay. She started the next task on her never-ending to-do list.

These vignettes illustrate some practical and psychological challenges facing newly independent writers as they develop their praxis, a time often fraught with uncertainty, fear, self-doubt, perfectionism, and distraction—all of which bury opportunities to internalize writing successes and celebrate small wins. Drawn from 8 years of learning, reading, coaching, experimentation, and reflection, this outtake presents five principles for developing a healthy and sustainable writing practice. Each principle is informed by both personal experience and broader conversations within academic writing communities, emphasizing balance, consistency, and well-being over

unrealistic expectations. I am grateful for the teachings of leaders who continue to pave the way for sustainable academic writing and whose ideas have indelibly shaped these principles.

Principle 1: Set Small, Realistic Goals and Plans

The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.

—Lao Tzu

Long-term success is an accumulation of small wins, so aiming for slow, consistent progress enables intentional goal-setting and thoughtful planning to prioritize time and stay focused. Invariably, plans change due to unforeseen circumstances, many of which are beyond one's locus of control, requiring priorities to shift over time to fit the reality of a season (e.g., an academic term). Shifting realities make planning the research-to-writing continuum all the more important. Big-picture planning is advanced by mapping out individual studies, the resultant manuscripts, co-author and team contributions, and cross-project pipeline management (e.g., working toward having a paper under review, in writing, and upcoming) to achieve long-term career goals and outcomes. Prioritized time management advances these visioning anchors by setting annual, quarterly, or monthly goals and assessing daily or weekly effort allocation to what matters most. In an austere time economy where focus is currency, timeboxing (e.g., blocking time in advance for specific tasks) allocates energy to prioritized projects first. Mentors are excellent resources to coach and cheer on early-career writers navigating the new territory of solo and first-author writing—and a robust pipeline is more easily maintained when one engages in projects with roles of varying responsibility (i.e., first author, coauthor, anchoring author, or mentor).

Principle 2: Build Accountability Using Support Systems and Meaningful Measures

You don't have to be great to start, but you have to start to be great.

—Zig Ziglar

Early on, writing is hard; the experience is better with friends. Since writing varies significantly across disciplines, joining colleagues beyond one's field in workshops, retreats, or write-in-place sessions may seem counterintuitive. Similar awkwardness may arise when approaching disciplinary peers, not as a coauthor, but as a coworker seeking to leverage the body-doubling effect through which colleagues share virtual or physical space to reduce isolation and increase focus and motivation. In both cases, peer

mentoring groups (LaChenaye et al., 2019) create supportive shared spaces that facilitate external accountability to non-urgent, long-term priorities. Groups also enable celebrations of success using meaningful measures that foreground slow, consistent achievement. Emphasis is oftentimes placed on lagging indicators (i.e., measures that retrospectively indicate success, such as the number of peer-reviewed journal articles) rather than leading indicators (i.e., measures that guide strategy, like the number of affirming writing sessions); it helps to focus on indicators that reinforce writing enjoyment (e.g., number of writing sessions that felt invigorating) to energize and motivate continued success.

Principle 3: Approach Writing as a Craft and a Relationship

The journey is the reward.

—Steve Jobs

Writing is a continuous journey of growth and learning, and success as a writer is measured not only in published words but also by developing habits of mind, day-to-day practices, and knowledge of writing that strengthens one's craft. Writing involves more than technical know-how: research writers assemble each part of the evidentiary chain (i.e., need, methods, findings, and meaning) to share their knowledge broadly. Our emotional selves influence our craft and may unwittingly shape our work if we fail to acknowledge how emotion affects tone, form, ideas, and impact. Emphasizing the importance of one's relationship with writing, Scholar's Voice (<https://scholarsvoice.org>) encourages the cultivation of positive feedback loops to create feelings that facilitate consistent writing while minimizing negative loops (e.g., those conjuring feelings of struggle, inadequacy, guilt, shame, or overwhelm). They further highlight that the practices supporting progression to a terminal position are likely different from those sustaining one's writing and career. Viewing writing as a craft and unfolding relationship highlights the unseen effort that goes into maintaining a healthy writing practice.

Principle 4: Curate Your Writing Environment for You

Joy is found not in finishing an activity but in doing it.

—Greg Anderson

It is common for writing to be pushed to the margins of our day-to-day doings, perhaps especially for educational writers who oftentimes hold dual roles as practitioner-scholars. Writing routines and rituals are beneficial for those managing dual

roles. Writing routines set the cadence of one's practice and benefit from energy audits to identify when one's best energy is available for writing. Less demanding tasks should be saved for the lower-energy hours of the workday, and consideration should be given to personal ebbs and flows (e.g., when to check email or scheduling around recurring commitments). While routines define a writing cadence that aligns with seasonal goals and constraints, a writing ritual establishes cues to facilitate its processes. Consider starting to write with virtual and physical distraction audits by decluttering your writing space, silencing notifications, and setting a relaxed mood (e.g., brew a cup of tea, diffuse scents, adjust the lighting, or play music that promotes creative thinking).

Principle 5: Sustain Your Writing Wellness Through Reflection

The only journey is the one within.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Writing rituals offer an excellent opportunity for reflection. This might involve a 5-minute practice to clear the mind by brain-dumping distractions, engaging in breathwork, affirming a writing goal, setting an intention, or engaging in warm-up writing through freewriting prompts or gratitude journaling. If this sounds high-maintenance, it is helpful to remember that sustained long-term writing success hinges on developing a balanced approach, prioritizing well-being and slow, consistent progress over constant output. Reflection enables a writing cadence that integrates personal and professional needs, maintains wellness and motivation, and mitigates burnout. It is essential to view writing as a practice, not a perfection. Writing rituals should strengthen and facilitate writing; reflecting on the usefulness of rhythms and routines helps writers figure out what works. Reflection enables what is known as double-loop learning, or trial-and-error learning, which improves processes over time. As newer writers learn what works for them, they benefit from setting limited priorities (i.e., starting small) and allowing tasks to take up to three times longer (i.e., combating perfectionist thinking). Invariably, things will fall apart. When they do, start again.

Closing Thoughts

It is challenging to resist the temptation to “reach for the moon and, in failing, land among the stars” (generally attributed to Norman Vincent Peale). As contributors to shared knowledge of curriculum and teaching, we build ladders and put them down for others. Don’t just do it; reflect on what works, prioritize what matters most, start small, and keep going. Together, we rise.

Reference

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