

## TRYING TO WRITE, INSTEAD OF "TRYING NOT TO WRITE"

**"The goal of scientific research is publication.** Scientists, starting as graduate students, are measured primarily not by their dexterity in laboratory manipulations, not by their innate knowledge of either broad or narrow scientific subjects, and certainly not by their wit or charm; **they are measured and become known (or remain unknown) by their publications.**"—Day and Gastel (2006)

As I sit down to write this piece, I feel great trepidation. Writing is the "currency" of scientists, but my pile of unwritten articles is much larger than I'd like. Various thoughts pass through my mind: This article may take me lots of time. Maybe I should get a cup of coffee first? Actually, another room is better. Then, there is that e-mail reply waiting—perhaps I should do that first. *Why is it so hard to write?*

Writing is important for advancing science and our careers. The process of writing forces us to improve our ideas, and those ideas are further improved through the review process. Publications make our ideas accessible to a larger audience, they provide deliverables for granting agencies, and they advance our careers. Therefore, for science and our careers to flourish, it is important that we become effective writers.

Research informs us that there is a solution to the dilemma of writing. Basically, we need to "try to write," rather than "try not to write."

### Trying Not to Write

One of my favorite books on writing is *How to Write a Lot*, by Paul Silvia (2007). Dr. Silvia identifies several common "specious" barriers to writing; that is, barriers that we pretend are real. Some of these specious barriers are:

- Only writing when there is "enough time"
- Only writing when inspired
- Saying that you have writer's block (although there is no such condition)
- Distracting yourself or wanting a different work space (like my shenanigans)
- Not writing until you have more analyses or more papers to cite
- Needing a perfect first draft or being afraid of criticism
- Pursuing a poorly conceived project that is not publishable or suffered from a lack of testable hypotheses or appropriate methods
- Pursuing a project that you hate

### Only Writing When There Is Enough Time or When You Are Inspired

Studies show that two of the most successful ways to "try not to write" are (1) only writing when there is sufficient time to write and (2) only writing when you are inspired. Both of these methods are known as "binge writing." Binge writers wait to sequester themselves to write.

Boice (1990) illustrates some of the pitfalls of binge writing and provides some successful strategies. He outlines a study of 27 faculty members who had reported difficulty in finishing their writing, even though each had a manageable writing project to complete. The faculty members were assigned to three groups and were studied for 10 weeks. The first group was told not to write except in the case of an "emergency." The second group was given 50 scheduled writing sessions, but only required to write if inspired. The third group was given 50 scheduled writing sessions but, if they did not write at least three pages each session, they were required to send money to a distasteful organization. The group that was obliged to write was significantly more productive than the other groups (FIG. 1). Furthermore, this group had a creative or novel idea each writing day (FIG. 1). In contrast, the group that

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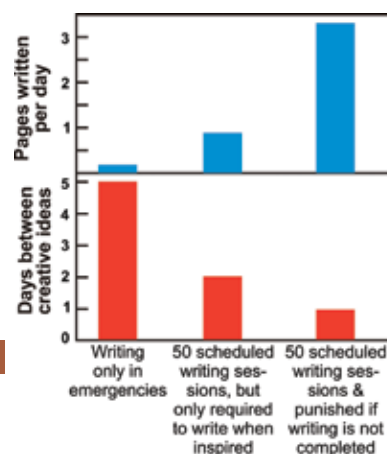


FIGURE 1

wrote only in emergencies had the lowest level of productivity and the least frequent creative ideas. Binge writing is ineffective: to write more productively, the best approach is to write regularly. In fact, some authors say that increasing scheduled writing time by as little as two hours a week convinces most writers that scheduled writing is the most effective approach.

### Tips on Trying to Write

1. *Make a schedule for writing.* Treat writing like teaching a class or going to a meeting: schedule it, make the time sacrosanct, and do not allow disturbances. Try to write every day for 20–90 minutes.
2. *Prioritize your writing tasks.* Do the most *important* things first (FIG. 2).
3. *Set goals and reward yourself upon completion.* Set clear, measurable goals that may be tested, for example "write 200 words." Goals and rewards provide motivation.
4. *Keep track of your work or enlist friends to help you keep on target and reward yourself.* Some people like to keep track of their work themselves, but others like to use a taskmaster (a peer) or a writing group (e.g. Silvia 2007).

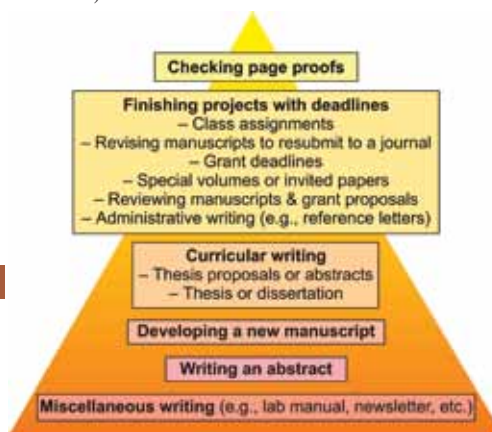


FIGURE 2

Now, it is time for me to do some scientific writing. But, that cup of coffee sounded great...

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