

## At Least One Small Thing a Day: The Elements of Writing Productivity

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“Writing productively is about actions you could easily do. Making a schedule, setting clear goals, keeping track of your work, rewarding yourself, and building good habits.”

—Paul Silva, *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing* (2007)

### Daily Routine/Frequent Short Writing Sessions

A sometimes counterintuitive and difficult habit to build, which has proven to be effective for many writers. *15 minutes each day is recommended and no more than 2 hours. Why?*

- “Binging corresponds to low productivity” (Boice 1987).
  - “[O]ne never feels truly ready” (Albrecht and Polehemus 1997).
  - When a project has gone “cold,” warm-up time/getting back into the piece can take up an entire longer session.
  - It is a misconception that “making progress” requires longer sessions.
  - Our ideas about the “effectiveness” of our work often correlate with mood, level of tiredness, and other emotional factors—the goal is to write through these suppressants.
  - Binges may reinforce negative associations with our writing sessions.
- Writers who follow a routine or a schedule have been shown to be more productive over time:
  - From Albrecht and Polehemus 1997: Faculty who find an hour per weekday to work on their research “generally manage to submit about 1.5 manuscripts per year.”
  - From Boice 1989 and 1997: Binge writers completed about 17 pages a year on average. Those who wrote daily, however, completed an average of 157 pages a year.

### “Mindfulness”/Physical and Emotional Comfort

Academics do not frequently talk about the emotional life that accompanies the professional research/writing life. *Strive to build a positive and enlivening relationship with your writing.*

- Anxiety, fear, dread, and other strong emotions can seriously impede writers (Keyes 1995).
- Boice’s research also found that “mindfulness” (here, denoting an awareness about emotions and physical reactions to situations) was key to maintaining productivity (1992).
- Take breaks. (No session longer than two hours—even when it’s going well!)
- All those strategies that keep marriages/relationships working effectively apply here as well: Kindness, listening, acknowledgement, validation, excitement, dates, rewards, planning, etc.
- Your body is as important as your writing brain. (Your body will remember discomfort—Not a great undercurrent to have for those who feel overwhelmed, anxious, or uncertain already.)

### Social Support/Engaged Communities

Writers Groups are discussed by many who research writing productivity as a key component of success.

- As Moore (2003) notes from her work with faculty writers, “People writing as part of a community of writers are more likely to learn faster about the conventions and challenges of writing, to support each other at times of blockage, and to demystify the process of writing by sharing each other’s successes and failures.”
- “Some write consistently well without having to talk about it” Belcher (2009) suggests, but “most of us need to admit our struggles [as writers] if we are to move beyond them.”
- Use group time to talk *briefly* about how you “feel” (*imposter syndrome* or *fear of success*, anyone?), to share and set goals, discuss progress, and reflect on what makes your writing project and process yours. (See Grant & Knowles 2000.)

## Mechanisms of Accountability

A number of researchers on writing productivity argue for the importance of developing mechanisms of accountability.

- Gray's (2010) work with faculty writers, for instance, has demonstrated that writers who share the daily progress they make in small groups “outperform” writers without mechanisms of accountability “by a factor of four.” These mechanisms not only support writers in keeping to their writing schedules, but also keep them focused on small steps and daily progress—the primary factor that leads to more prolific writing output for professionals at all stages of their careers.

## Getting Started with Your Plan:

It's takes time and focused intention to build a new habit.

- Set goals—but check them. (Keep goals realistic. Practice self-care in your goal setting.)
- Commit yourself to one small thing a day (or 15 minutes of writing). You can increase this once the habit is developed. *Complement these shorter sessions with weekly or bi-weekly longer sessions.*
- The old adage of writing first thing in the morning holds true—to avoid interruptions, calls to firefighting, and other distractions—DO NOT OPEN YOUR EMAIL.
- Break up the project into manageable chunks, e.g. “This week, I'll work on my methods section.”
- Keep your iPad, a notebook/paper with you at all times, so that you can take advantage of spare moments. Once you get into this process and a project gets rolling the momentum will build. Moments of insight *will occur* with more frequency.
- Keep track of how many pages, words, or tasks you complete. Reward your successes!
- Keep a “to-do list” for your project, so that you know what to do next when you've completed a task.
- Be prepared with strategies for when the writing gets hard. What will you do if you are blocked? Can't find that source? Can't quite figure out how to do THE THING?
- ***Talk to other writers about their experiences, strategies, work habits, and struggles.***
- Remember: Everyone falls off the productivity wagon. ***All you have to do is get back on when you realize you're off track.***

## Select Sources

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