

# Maximizing Your Writing Productivity

**Anne Marie Weber-Main, PhD**  
Associate Professor of Medicine  
Director of Faculty Mentoring  
University of Minnesota Medical School



---

---

---

---

---

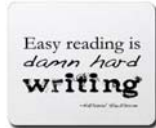
---

---

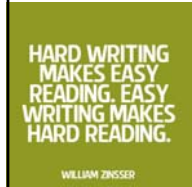
---



“Like most writers, I don't like to write; I like to have written.”



Zinsser W. *On Writing Well*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York, NY: Harper Collins; 1998



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Let's talk about YOUR writing process

1. What “slows you down”? What are some of barriers you have encountered to making progress on a writing project?



2. What strategies have you used successfully (or attempted to use) to be a more productive writer?



3. What stage(s) of the writing process or types of writing tasks do you enjoy the most? The least?



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Barrier: "I don't have any (or enough) time to write"

Some approaches to finding time to write:

- Clearing the decks
- Wedging
- Scheduling

Candib LM. Making time to write? *Annals of Family Medicine* 2005;3(4):365-366.



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Deck Clearers

**Idiom "clear the decks" means:**  
To finish dealing with what you are doing so that you can start to do something more important.

**With respect to writing:**

"Having finished or set aside all other projects, you barricade yourself against interruptions, and work without pause for a heavenly period."



### The Problem:

You can never write *until* the decks are cleared – which might be impossible.

"If" is the plague of deck clearers.

Candib LM. *Annals of Family Medicine*. 2005;3(4):365-366.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Wedgers

"...are driven to write and do it in between everything else...."

They "wedge prose into short intervals: 15 minutes between meetings; a half-hour between when the kids leave and they have to leave for work; an hour on the plane before the pilot's announcement to shut off electronic devices."



### The Problem:

Wedging gives you bits and pieces. At some point, you need to clear the decks and schedule time to work on all of those bits.

"When" constrains the wedger.

Candib LM. *Annals of Family Medicine*. 2005;3(4):365-366.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Schedulers

"Some get up early in the morning, some write after others go to bed at night, some come home from work and write for a few hours with their work spread out on the dining room table....Schedulers also create special space – a study, an alcove, a spot, a chair."



### The Reality:

*"Sooner or later, most writers, after trying all sorts of strategies, become schedulers, but how they get there is variable."*

Candib LM. Annals of Family Medicine. 2005;3(4):365-366.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Writing rituals: Time, place, behavior



"Writing well is not totally a matter of will and self-discipline. Human beings have a need for reassurance and control that simple determination does not provide. Writing rituals help meet these needs. The right pen, the lucky clipboard, the same early morning hours, the ritualistic classroom procedure, the usual posture, the routine motions—foolish and inconsequential as they may seem to be—have the power to provide patterns that enhance the act of writing."

Who, What, When, and Where of Writing Rituals, by Kathleen O'Shaughnessy, Connie McDonald, Harriet Maher, Ann Dobie. *The Quarterly*, fall 2002 Vol. 24, No. 4. <http://www.nwp.org/cs/publication/resource/456> (Resource on website for the National Writing Project)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Discuss writing tasks



**You have 1 hour of scheduled writing time.**

- What kinds of writing or writing-related tasks might you engage in?
- Consider tasks for the beginning, middle, and end stages of writing a manuscript for publication.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Barrier: "I'm not ready to write."

I need to read more literature. I need to do more analyses. I need to \_\_\_\_\_.

**"Many writers I've worked with ...persevere too long in one or more of the stages of writing. They may spend too much time preparing notes from the literature relevant their project, they may revise formal drafts too many times."**

Boice R. *Professors as Writers: A Self-Help Guide to Productive Writing*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press; 1990.



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Solutions?

1. Recognize that these are valid writing tasks that you can (and should!) do this during your scheduled writing time.
2. Know thyself – and set limits accordingly!

**Me = Perfectionist, anxiety at start of a challenging writing (or editing) project**

- Practice sending "messy drafts" to others for interim feedback; experience success in moving the project forward more rapidly.
- Draft key ideas in pen and paper
- Leave "placeholders in text" for things I can't quite get right...
- Write as if talking informally ("what I really mean to say is...")
- Recognize my saturation point.

### Your thoughts?



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### General strategies for getting "unstuck"

1. **Leapfrog.** Stop trying to write sequentially. Jump around in your draft to the next section that interests you. Then fill in the gaps later.
2. **Change your writing method for a while.** Leave your computer and use pen and paper.
3. **Change your writing time.** We are almost all morning or evening people, and probably write during our best time. If stuck, try writing during your "off time." That is, if you are a morning person, try writing in the evening for a while.
4. **Prepare a lecture.** Imagine that you must present your paper to colleagues tomorrow morning. How would you organize and present the information?
5. **Talk to a colleague.** Discussing your project with an insightful coworker can help bring out the ideas hiding just below the surface.

Taylor RB. *The Clinician's Guide to Medical Writing*. New York: Springer. 2005.



---

---

---

---

---

---

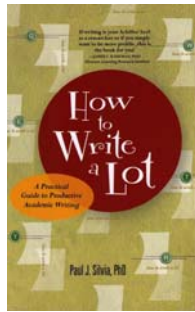
---

---

## Barrier: "I don't feel like writing."

Paul Silva says:

"Struggling writers who 'wait for inspiration' should get off their high horse and join the unwashed masses of real academic writers."



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**When faced with the choice to write or do something else...  
A wide assortment of "something else" activities can become surprisingly appealing**

### At Home

- Take a nap
- Paint the bathroom
- Defrost the freezer
- Call your mom

### At Work

- Clean your office
- Check, answer, sort through emails
- Get coffee
- Socialize
- Wish for pager to go off



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Consider Contingency Management

The systematic reinforcement of desired behaviors and withholding of reinforcement until desired behaviors take place

"Decide which recurrent, daily activities you enjoy and make them contingent on doing a valued, but delayable task first."

Boice R. *Professors as Writers: A Self-Help Guide to Productive Writing*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press; 1990.

Establish a contingency for completing your scheduled writing time.

"I cannot do \_\_\_\_ until I do \_\_\_\_."



---

---

---

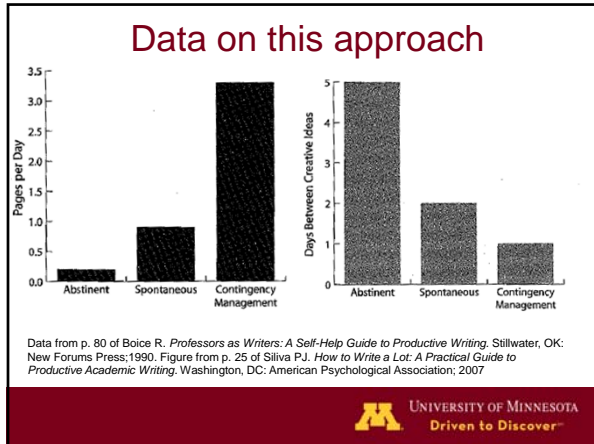
---

---

---

---

---




---

---

---

---

---

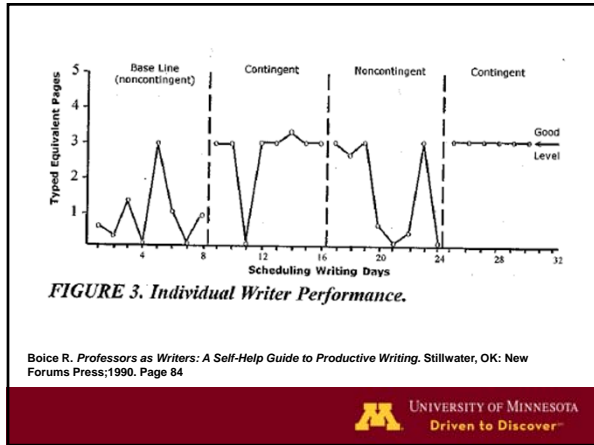
---

---

---

---

---




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### The Blocking Questionnaire

- Checklist for overt signs of blocking (COSB)
- Checklist of cognitions/emotions in blocking (CCB)
- Survey of social skills in writing (SSSW)

By Robert Boice

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
Driven to Discover™

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Social Skills in Writing

- A very common, but often ignored factor in blocking
- Includes items such as:
  - “I tend to resent people who try to help me with my writing.” (procrastination)
  - “I resist the temptation to ask for opinions, etc., before submitting a paper because I’m simply too busy.” (impatience)
  - “I think it’s best not to discuss my writing problems with others.” (apprehension)
  - “I tend to see criticisms of my writing as personal attacks.” (dysphoria)



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## If high score on the (SSSW)



- Too private about your writing
- Too reluctant to impose on others for help with writing
- Less likely to establish professional connections that help ensure success in writing.



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Writing as a team sport

### Potential advantages include:

- Skills of one author can supplement deficiencies in another.
- Workload is shared.
- New ideas and perspectives enrich the text.
- Writer has more interaction, less isolation
- New writers can be mentored



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Characteristics of successful writing teams

- Defined roles - take advantage of each author's skills - not just in their scientific content area, but also in their approach to writing.
- Leadership
- Vested team members - willing to work, committed to seeing the project through to final outcome
- Commitment to regular meetings
- Foster a safe space for honest and direct discussions, disagreements, and problem-solving.



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Roles of Writing Partners

- Writer
  - Freewriter of first drafts
  - Polisher: Excellent substantive editor; puts manuscript in final publishable style
- Critical thinker
- Literature reviewer
- Statistical expert
- Leader, Critiquer, Cheerleader

Davidhizar R, Dowd S. Writing scholarly papers as a team. *Health Care Superv* 1998;16(4):53-60.



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## A note about authorship ethics



### Recommends that authorship be based on 4 criteria:

1. Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work;  
AND
2. Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content  
AND
3. Final approval of the version to be published  
AND
4. Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



## Problem authors

- **Honorary author:** listed as author but DOES NOT meet the criteria

hon-or-ar-y  
conferred as an honor, without the usual requirements or functions. Synonyms: [titular](#), [symbolic](#), in name only, [ceremonial](#), [nominal](#), [unofficial](#), [token](#)

- **Ghost author:** Not listed as author, despite actually meeting the criteria for authorship



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Writing Support Groups



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Thank You!



<http://cyberface.org/blogging/content-writing/writers-block-get-started-writing/>



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---