

The Chronicle  
Productivity Guide to  
**Writing  
& Publishing**

- ✓ Finding time and managing your project list
- ✓ Conquering isolation
- ✓ Overcoming inner obstacles
- ✓ Navigating the publishing process



THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

The Chronicle  
Productivity Guide to  
**Writing &  
Publishing**

Essential tools and tips  
for your success, from  
experts across academe

# What You'll Learn



Academics are under increasing pressure to share their research results, whether in scholarly journals and books, newspaper op-eds, or public presentations. Sometimes it's hard to see your way clear from idea to finished product: Other demands on your time can get in the way, and so can self-doubts and confusion about your goals and your audience.

This guide will help you overcome those obstacles. It will show you how to tap into your creativity, figure out structure, and wrestle writer's block to the ground, as well as how to manage multiple projects, communicate with editors, and make the most of peer reviewers' comments.

Filled with insights from experienced academics and editors, and concrete plans you can follow, this guide will enable you to manage your time, stay motivated, produce your best work, and make the most of it once it's published.

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# Time and Project Management

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# A Writing-Productivity Pipeline

- ✓ Keep track of projects in various stages.
- ✓ Figure out where to focus your attention, and how.
- ✓ Identify signs that you need to shift gears.

If you're like me, you may be nostalgic about your grad-school days, when working on your dissertation gave you a real clarity of purpose. I got up every morning, made myself a cup of coffee, and sat down at my computer to write one thing and one thing only. I wallowed in my data, labored over every word and sentence, and produced something of which I was truly proud.

Fast-forward 10 years. I now have 14 manuscripts in various states of completion. At one end of the spectrum is a just-published book, and at the other is the initial data analysis for a future article. In the middle is a vast, messy space of manuscripts that are partially or mostly complete, as well as those either under review or facing "revise and resubmit" deadlines.

Whether or not you have tenure, the luxury of working on one big thing at a time is completely and hopelessly gone. Even as you're pulled in multiple directions conceptually and theoretically, you need to keep different projects moving steadily along, so that you have a relatively reliable rate of scholarly productivity. Incremental progress made on multiple manuscripts can start to feel like no progress made on anything.

Academics often allude to the 2-2-2 rule: Always have two manuscripts in preparation, two under review, and two in press. While that captures the need to have manuscripts in various stages at all times, there are many more categories than those three.

A few years ago, senior scholars in my department advised me to start thinking about my manuscripts as occu-



pying different places in a pipeline, with proposals on one end and published articles at the other. The goal: Keep your papers distributed along that pipeline, and flowing through.

I adopted their advice and made it my own by creating 11 places along the pipeline into which I organize my work. My organizational strategy is decidedly low-tech: a daily planner and Post-it notes. But this could easily be done on a laptop. Here are my 11 manuscript categories and what falls into each one:

- **Conceiving new ideas.** In this category go the sparks and glimmers of new writing projects and grant ideas that are just coming together. They're undeveloped but have crystallized enough to be put on a sticky note. These may be things you're thinking about proposing for a conference paper or for a new research proposal.
- **Draft proposals.** If faculty members in your field are expected to apply for federal or foundation grants, most of your writing projects probably start out as research proposals sent to external agencies.
- **Proposals under review.** Once you've submitted the grant proposals, they move to this category and can sometimes sit there for months as they undergo peer review. This is also the place where you can put book proposals and manuscripts for special issues of journals to which you're contributing as an editor or author.
- **Data collection.** Once a project gets funded, the next thing you're probably doing is collecting data, or doing archival or library research.
- **Data analysis.** Never make the mistake of being too linear in your research and writing. That is, carve off small pieces of a large project and publish them, even while the main research questions of the study are still in play. Those small pieces could take the form of a brief case study or a publication about a new instrument. The point is to break off small pieces for data analysis even while you're still collecting data.
- **Manuscripts in draft form.** A draft goes into this category as soon as you have a pretty good idea of what it might look like and where you might submit it. Everything here is in some state of data analysis or write-up. It's likely to be your biggest category, because it includes papers that are just outlined as well as those that are pretty far along.
- **Almost ready for submission.** Here is the first stop for a finished paper. This is an important category, because it differentiates the papers that might require months more of analysis and writing from those that are more or less finished and ready for a conference or external review.
- **Manuscripts under review.** These writing projects are off of your plate for the time being, as someone else decides whether or not they should be accepted.
- **In revision.** Pretty much every manuscript gets a revise-and-resubmit, or some form of revision, before it is officially accepted for publication. You should put even rejected papers in this group because, of course, they're

going to have to be revised before you submit them elsewhere. I use a sticky note for the date a manuscript needs to be resubmitted to remind me of the deadline.

- **Revisions under review.** If a manuscript makes it into this group, it means you've received suggestions from the editors, have attended to those issues, and written them a thoughtful and detailed letter. Now all you're waiting on is word that the editors and reviewers have approved your changes, have any objections to them, and/or have come up with even more changes they want you to make. Once your papers come back from review, they may shift back and forth between this category and the previous one, as you make further changes and resubmit.
- **In press and published.** The best category of all. A manuscript that makes it to this point exits your pipeline altogether and lands happily on your CV.

You can keep your writing pipeline on a magnet board or simply on a page in your daily planner. Once every few weeks, update it. If none of your manuscripts have changed positions, ask yourself: Why wasn't I writing enough? Why haven't I made progress? Am I the holdup? Or is something going on with one of my co-authors? How can I better plan my time in the next few weeks to actually get something moving forward?

If a lot of papers have been stuck at a single spot on the pipeline for a while, it might be time to pick off the one that's most finished and commit to getting it moved to the next category. Similarly, if a paper has been under review for a long time, maybe it's time to contact the editors to ask for an update.

However you organize your writing pipeline, it can help you figure out how to proceed with projects. For example, if you have a lot of papers that are in the conceptualization stages but nothing under review, it might be a good time to pick one of the papers that is the furthest along and get it under review, rather than try to move all of those papers forward simultaneously.

Similarly, if you have a lot of manuscripts that have been rejected, and you need to determine where else to submit them, then it might be time to focus on getting those papers back out and under review elsewhere.

A tracking system like this helps you analyze where to focus your efforts and gives you a reason to celebrate when a manuscript moves from one category to the next. Until you retire, you may never regain the clarity and simplicity of purpose of your dissertation-writing days. However, with a productivity pipeline, you can still sit down with that cup of coffee and get writing, since you know the other projects are also moving along.

*Adapted from an essay by Erin Marie Furtak, an associate professor of education at the University of Colorado at Boulder.*

# How to Tame Your Writing Project

**T**he key to productive writing is steady engagement with a project you find rewarding. But academic writing projects don't always feel rewarding — in fact, they often feel like predators lurking in the jungle, ready to attack. Who wants to engage with them?

Your first instinct, when your writing project starts to feel like a wild animal, may be to keep your distance. But that just makes things worse. You need to find ways to tame it and re-establish safe, steady engagement.

Here are three interrelated project-taming techniques that can reduce your fear, and help you complete your writing project:

## Create a project box.

You probably compose on a computer, and save written files there. But you can organize your project using a real box. The project box, first suggested by David Sternberg in his 1981 classic, *How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation*, is a straightforward way to open and close an organized set of project-related files. Sure, this can be done electronically, but an actual portable hanging-file box with a lid that locks, available at office-supply stores for under \$20, will keep the work contained and separate from all your other commitments.

Label your hanging files like so: Outlines (various overviews); Questions (that you want to answer through the project); Next Steps; References; Chapter X Notes (ideas and outlines for each chapter or section); and the crucial

✓ 3 tools to avoid feeling overwhelmed, to acknowledge the hidden causes of your writer's block, and to make progress every day.

Ventilation File (explained below). That's all. It may not sound like much, but it can keep your project from overwhelming you.

Scholarly projects expand and mutate. It is disorienting to deal with an ever-changing collection of possibilities. A box of hanging files, including outlines and questions, allows you to create structure for, and place limits on, an always-proliferating project.

## **Use a “ventilation file.”**

Even when safely corralled, any project can start to feel toxic or pointless. You begin to doubt it and resist working on it. That is where the amazing power of what Sternberg calls the ventilation file comes in. It's a confidential space for every hostile, resentful, negative thing that comes up when you try to write — a mental and physical space for the misery that academic writing can generate.

If you have a project box organizing your writing and you are committed to opening it for at least 15 minutes a day (see below), and yet you are still stalled or resisting, then something is up. The problem is not structure or time. It is something else. And if you ignore that “something else” it will just get stronger or come back in another guise. That's when it's time to vent.

The great thing about this technique is that it acknowledges and incorporates your resistance to writing into the project itself. You get to explore why you don't want to be writing at all.

Rant to your heart's content about all of the obstacles you are facing in the project. Once you've written them down, you can set them aside — you don't have to reread what you've written, and you can tear it up if you prefer. But if you do reread, you will find out what you are telling yourself about the project, your abilities, and your situation. Then you can deal with the obstacles by talking with friends, asking advice from a colleague, or seeking therapy. As the Buddhists suggest, one of the best ways to deal with your demons is to invite them in for tea.

## **Write for 15 minutes a day.**

So the project box corrals, and the ventilation file decontaminates. But what about the 15-minutes idea? Surely no one can get a scholarly writing project finished by writing only 15 minutes a day?

Well, yes, you can. I first heard about this technique in Virginia Valian's engaging 1977 essay “Learning to Work.” When Valian was beginning her academic career, 15 minutes was the maximum amount of time she could force herself to write before being overwhelmed by anxiety. She asked her boyfriend to time her, and she collapsed as soon as her 15 minutes ended. But as she met her time commitment, over and over, her anxieties diminished, and she was eventually able to connect reliably with intellectual work. She has had a long and admirable career as a psycholinguist.

Research on writing productivity confirms her experience. Studies show that brief, consistent contact (daily is best) with a writing project results in more creativity and productivity than long, intermittent writing bouts. Anyone can find 15 minutes a day. I recommend six rather than seven sessions of writing each week, so that you can always take a day off, guilt free.

It is reasonable to feel overwhelmed by a project that has no boundaries. It is also

common to be distracted by unacknowledged writing issues, and deluded about how much time you actually need to spend writing. Under these conditions, your project starts to feel unsafe, and so you start to avoid it, which just makes things worse. These three techniques break that pattern. They allow your project to feel less like a wild beast lurking in the jungle, ready to devour you, and more like a friendly pet — waiting in the backyard, ready for a daily walk.

*Adapted from an essay by Joli Jensen, a professor of media studies at the University of Tulsa and the author of Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics (University of Chicago Press, 2017).*

## SCHOLARS TALK WRITING:

# How Do You Get Your Writing Done?

As Twain said, first thing in the morning (when I am healthy and in a rhythm) I eat the frog. (Mark Twain: “Eat a live frog first thing in the morning and nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day.”) All the other self-deception (that answering email is “working”) can wait until I’m spent (i.e., after three hours, if I am lucky, of concentration).

— *Sam Wineburg, a professor of education and, by courtesy, of history at Stanford University*

Like everyone else on the planet, when I really need to finish something I force myself to shut down my email — then I find myself sneaking and checking it on my phone. I typically need to fool myself into starting things, to sort of sneak up from behind on them — articles or reviews on deadlines, I mean. I tend to accumulate a lot of scraps of paper, then waste a lot of time typing them up and cutting and pasting and rearranging the new pieces (I mean physically, with scissors and tape and so on), which at least produces the illusion of momentum. It’s all incredibly inefficient.

— *Laura Kipnis, a professor of film at Northwestern University*

I find that I really get more done during the term, when not on sabbatical. I like the structure of the teaching week. I like moving back and forth between the classroom and the writing desk. Reading for class keeps me reading strenuously. The classroom discussions keep my brain alight.

— *Jay Parini, a professor of English at Middlebury College*

The main thing is to write like you exercise: at least a little bit, most days. It’s tempting to think you can research first, and then write. That may work (sort of) in the “hard” sciences, but even there, early writing can be helpful because writing reveals the holes in your arguments. At worst, you have a head start on the writing you are going to have to do anyway, when the data collection and analysis are finished. Furthermore, writing makes you a more focused and attentive reader of other works. When you are writing, you read to interrogate that author about a particular point.

— *Michael C. Munger, a political scientist at Duke University*

# Finding the Time to Write

- ✓ Figure out how you're using your time.
- ✓ Stop succumbing to semi-crises.

Each semester academics schedule certain days, mornings, or afternoons for writing — and all too often, other obligations invade that time. How will you ever find time to write when you're already swamped?

The fact is, not everything that fills your time matters as much as writing. You acknowledge as much when you re-schedule writing for “later” — some mythical time when you can do it thoroughly and thoughtfully and well. But “later” usually ends up just as busy and pressured as today. And every day you don't write is another day you feel frustrated and guilty.

You may vow to become a better time manager. But before you can manage your time, you need to know exactly what's happening to it. You need to let go of the delusion that you'll have more time later, and instead figure out just where your time is going, now.

Here's one way to do that: **Spend two weeks scrupulously keeping a “reverse day planner.”** Instead of recording upcoming events, document in as much detail as possible how you spent your time. Include not only the hours you devoted to preparing courses, grading papers, and meeting with students and colleagues, but also to routine tasks, like doing the dishes and the laundry, running errands, and driving. And don't forget the time you spent answering email, reading, meeting friends, surfing the net, staring at the wall, and sleeping.

My day planner is a lovely desk-sized leather academic calendar, with two pages per week. On the left page are seven days, divided into morning and afternoon, with blank

lines for every hour; on the right is a lined page for additional notes. I simply note on the left what I did every day with my time, and use the right lined sheet to help explain my choices to myself. I do this as the day unfolds, and I make sure the planner is completely filled in by bedtime. Every hour is accounted for — walking the dog, writing a letter of recommendation, attending department meetings, eating, watching TV.

Keep a record like that, and the results may astonish you. Within two weeks of logging my time, I realized that I was a whirling dervish of unexamined commitments. For years I'd been trying to “balance” work and family by squeezing in more writing, service, exercise, and self-care activities. And I was feeling like a failure because one or more of those was always getting short shrift. No wonder I was exhausted and bewildered by my inability to “find” time to write.

A reverse day planner can reveal in concrete detail how ineffective your so-called balancing act really was.

You'll see exactly how often (“just this once!”) you're giving up writing time. I'd been succumbing to what can be called quasi-crises — seemingly urgent requests with a pending deadline. I wanted to “get them off my plate.” Or I'd change my schedule because I didn't want to make trouble for someone else. And I'd delude myself into thinking these interruptions wouldn't take long.

Looking over your reverse day planner, you can stop wondering why you can't find time to write. You may find that you're spending too much of your writing time on social media, video games, or cooking. Or going to movies or working out. But whatever you discover, you will learn what is really getting your time, energy, and attention. Then you get to decide: Are those things more important to you than writing?

If not, it's time to put writing in a place of honor. Learn to circle the wagons, close your door, and shut out distractions — like email, nonurgent phone calls, social media, and people who drop by — because if you don't respect and protect your scholarly time, who will?

And use the reverse day planner to keep yourself on track. It's an irrefutable record of when and how you fail to secure your writing time, and of how you manage to get things done when you choose to write as scheduled. Once you know how you fill your day, you can give your writing the protected time it deserves.

*Adapted from an essay by Joli Jensen, a professor of media studies at the University of Tulsa and the author of Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics (University of Chicago Press, 2017).*

You'll see exactly how often  
 (“just this once!”) you're  
 giving up writing time.

# Start Managing Your Energy

- ✓ Keep track of when you feel most productive.
- ✓ Tackle creative challenges when your energy is high.
- ✓ Avoid a “work till you drop” pattern.

If you're like most academic writers, you don't pay much attention to the way your energy levels fluctuate as you work. Instead you just keep pushing yourself to get through the day.

What you may not realize: Protecting your energy is key to academic productivity. Sure, it is important to use techniques to connect effectively with your project and to schedule frequent, low-stress, high-reward times to write. And it helps to have an inviting, orderly workspace with “a door that closes.” But once you've tamed your project, and secured writing time and space for it, you still need to learn how to make the most of those periods of the day when you tend to be most productive.

In his book on academic writing, *The Clockwork Muse*, Eviatar Zerubavel says: “Just as you optimize your other writing conditions, learn to identify the best times for your writing.” He suggests that you spend a week keeping track of when you feel most and least productive, and then use that knowledge to identify your best hours for writing.

Call your most energetic hours A time. Your goal is to devote your A time to writing and protect it from being filled up doing a lot of B and C tasks. B tasks require alertness and focus, but not necessarily your very best energies. C tasks are mostly rote — work that doesn't require much creativity. Start valuing yourself enough to assign A time to A tasks, B time to B tasks, and C time to C tasks.

Recently, a colleague told me she doesn't really understand this ABC stuff. She just goes flat out every day, and then collapses. She does the same the next day and the day



after. She is a dedicated professor in the midst of writing yet another book, does more than her share of university service, and is rearing two young children. Her strategy: Pour energy into everything and hope that a decent night's sleep will get her through the next day.

The problem with that strategy: You start to feel like a horse straining to pull a cart that is getting more and more loaded down. A work-until-you-drop pattern keeps you from recognizing that your academic responsibilities actually vary in what they require of you. And it keeps you from honoring how your own creative energies fluctuate. Setting up a system where you give your A time to A tasks, and so forth, means that you get to decide how and when to load your own cart.

At research universities, scholarship is the primary requirement for academic success, yet it is also the easiest of our work responsibilities to put off. There is a time-management technique in which you arrange your responsibilities into a quadrant, sorted by urgency and importance. Academic writing is a classic example of a nonurgent but important task; the kind that usually gets pushed aside, because our days are so full of things that need immediate attention. We squander our energies on email, memos, and meetings. And our scholarship — important but not urgent — gets pushed to the back burner.

But your scholarly work deserves A energy. Coursework — preparation, presentation, and grading on important tests and papers — usually requires B energy. Email, routine grading, advising, reports, and meetings are mostly C level tasks; they can be done responsibly even when you aren't at your best. So just like at tenure time, research, teaching, and service come in descending order of importance — not in terms of cosmic value, but in relation to what kinds of energy they require.

My most creative time is early morning, but for years I found myself using that time for more immediate tasks than writing. I feared letting people down, so I let lecture preparations, grading, and emails leak into my A time. Email, especially, is a seductive rabbit hole for your energy. I am learning to wait to check my email until my early-morning writing is done, and my courses are prepared.

So figure out when you are most focused and alert, and protect that time for your most important tasks. Then organize your days as much as possible to match B tasks with B energy and C tasks with C energy. Your scholarship really does deserve your best energies — even if it is nonurgent. There is nothing more important than writing to your academic career.

Another benefit of this system is that it helps you recognize, and detach, from the stuff that drains you. Many aspects of academic life are energy vampires. Office politics, interpersonal tensions, unwise service commitments take a serious toll, especially if you take them too seriously. If you can't avoid those energy drains, then at least give them your C energy.

Giving everything equal energy until you drop from exhaustion doesn't work. In fact, it sucks the joy from teaching and service as well as scholarship. But once you learn to match task to energy, you give yourself the chance to experience what is rewarding in all phases of your professional life.

*Adapted from an essay by Joli Jensen, a professor of media studies at the University of Tulsa, and the author of Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics (University of Chicago Press, 2017).*

# Get Original Thoughts Flowing

- ✓ Read, then get away from your sources.
- ✓ Develop your ideas as they strike you, not just when you're at your desk.

At the end of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, his epic account of Western literature, he says the book was possible only because he, a German Jew, was exiled in Istanbul and away from his books. He still had access to his primary texts, the great works of Western literature — Homer, Dante, Virginia Woolf — but he was separated from the academic libraries of Europe and thus liberated from the influence and obligations of scholarship. He had nothing but himself and his texts.

One of the challenges of our digital age is that we are rarely away from our books — not only our Google Books, but also the ideas of others that flood the internet and our research notes. This challenge is especially pointed given the purpose of academic writing: to make an original contribution to a scholarly conversation. Academic writing requires originality, but it can be elusive, especially in fields such as history, philosophy, and literary studies that interpret and reinterpret past ideas and scholarship.

There is a fine line between being responsive and being derivative. Articles and books are often rejected by publishers or reviewed negatively by readers because they are not sufficiently original. Sometimes, as in the case of Auerbach, the greatest contributions to an academic field come from those who are least enmeshed in it.

“Me thinks that the moment my legs began to move,” wrote Henry David Thoreau, “my thoughts began to flow.” Stand up, step away from your books, walk around, and write — that has become my answer to the problem of scholarly overexposure.

I began to practice “mobile composing” when I found myself with a newborn baby and 30 more pages to write of my dissertation. I began dictating into my phone on long walks with my son in his stroller. One of the virtues of this method was that it got me away from my books, thus ensuring that I was offering my own insights as opposed to creating a pastiche of quotations and ideas from other critics.

I would wake up at around 4 a.m. — before my son awoke and demanded my attention. I would use this unfettered time to read over the literary works and passages I was writing about that day, as well as relevant criticism I planned to consider.

By 7 a.m. or so, my son would wake up and I would make him breakfast and send my wife off to work, as the material I had read that morning rattled around in my mind, figuring itself out. At around 9, I would head out for a long walk with my son. Inevitably, whatever was important from what I had read that morning would stick in my head, and I took the time on those long walks to organize my thoughts and plan a way to present them effectively.

When it came time to actually write, I would walk for four or five minutes, thinking about the sentence I was composing, revising it in my head. Then I would dictate it into my phone. The sentence might be only 10 to 15 words, but they had behind them several minutes of thinking about how to sharpen both the quality of the idea and the clarity of its expression. I usually wrote two to four double-spaced pages each day.

I wouldn't copy my mobile compositions over to a word-processing program immediately. Often they sat on my phone and in my pocket for several days, which meant that they were available for revisions as I went about my life. Previously some residual thought might have been victoriously nodded at and then forgotten. Now it could be captured. Mobile composing allowed me to develop my ideas organically over time, not just when I had the luxury of sitting at my desk.

When I was happy with the mobile composition, I would pull it up on my phone and manually retype it into a word-processing program. Doing so meant that I was revising both my ideas and my language as they cycled in through my eyes, back through my mind, and out through my fingers — revisions that might not have occurred had I simply imported my mobile composition whole.

Mobile composing need not be done on an electronic device, of course. The core of the idea is walking and thinking, which is periodically recorded in writing. But we now have the technology to write, via dictation, while we walk. Walking gets the mind warm, propels thought forward, encourages energy and movement in ideas through energy and movement in the body.

One virtue of using a mobile device is that walking and thinking and writing by speaking imitates the act of revising. Usually, we should write more like we talk. We should avoid inflated diction, and we should try to imitate the rhythms of speech in our writing. Mobile composing satisfies both demands, helping one write in plain yet elegant language.

I've also discovered that Siri, the “personal assistant” on iPhones, is narcissistic: She always hears “theory” as “Siri.” She is also philosophically opinionated: She hears “Nietzsche” as “shit.”

*Adapted from an essay by Jeffrey R. Wilson, a preceptor in expository writing at Harvard University.*

# Negotiating Authorship

Authorship disputes are not uncommon, especially in the sciences, where multi-authored articles are the norm. Even when the question of who did what is not in dispute, there may be resentments about who is named in the list of authors and in what order. That's because careers depend on the credit associated with authorship and a lot of folks — by no mere coincidence, junior scientists more often — end up getting less credit than they think they deserve.

There is no way that your position in a series of names can appropriately represent what you actually did for a paper. With the exception of single-authored papers, any list of authors is bound to be unfair to someone. (Come to think of it, many single-authored papers probably have credit disputes, too.) But this system is the one we have for the time being. So if you want credit for your work, then authorship is where you get it.

One way to minimize disputes is to **have a conversation about authorship and roles upfront** and negotiate an agreement before any serious work happens.

Negotiation sometimes gets a bad rep. A lot of people think it means fighting for as much as you can get, and then seeing who wins the argument. Certainly, if you approach negotiation positionally, it can end badly, perhaps for both sides.

Negotiation is more successful as a principled discussion, in which both parties create an arrangement that mutually meets their interests. You and your collaborators need to discuss your mutual interests as well as how the work will be conducted and what authorship will look like. It's a bad idea to start working on a project without this agreement. If you decide the authorship arrangement won't be worth the amount of trouble you would be putting in, drop out of the project.

Of course, there are imbalances of power in any collaboration. Powerful people may attempt to take more credit than they are due, and less powerful people can get the other end of that stick. The negotiations may be unfair, or subsequent unfair decisions may alter a negotiated agreement. Upfront negotiations can't eliminate the possibility of malfeasance but can establish a clear arrangement, so that any violation can be clearly documented.

When a paper has five authors — including, for example, the person who came up with the idea, the PI for the lab, and the grad student in another lab who collected some samples — there are several different authorship sequences that could be proposed, all of which might seem fair. It's OK to change things by mutual agreement as a project progresses.

It might seem silly — or like you're getting ahead of yourself — to have a formal discussion about authorship before any data exist. But really, that's the only sensible time to have that conversation, if you have any hope of avoiding unfair surprises.

*Adapted from an essay by Terry McGlynn, a professor of biology at California State University-Dominguez Hills.*

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# Writing Groups

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# Why You Need a Writing Group

If you don't have a writing group, you need one. That's true whether you are in graduate school or well into your academic career.

The isolating and competitive atmosphere of academia is enough to produce anxiety and depression in many a scholar. Ingrained in all of us is the idea that we're not doing academia right unless we are regularly home alone in front of our computers. A writing group is automatically subversive — a parallel universe outside of those games. It offers a place to find support and mutual collaboration, and can help you take control of your own destiny and define success for yourself.

Building your own support team is especially critical if you come from a demographic that is underrepresented in academia. You may have a hard time getting good mentorship. You may encounter discrimination or just strange treatment in classes. Writing groups are a way to get support from your peers, and to reciprocate. Placing the focus of the group specifically on writing will help you construct your identity as an independent (and interconnected) scholar in a community of thinkers.

Being in a writing group — where you share drafts and encourage each other to write, and revise, often — will also keep you writing and bring you inspiration when your own is faltering. Those things can feel revolutionary in an academic culture in which we hide (or deride) unfinished scholarly work. Build the support you want to have.

## How writing groups operate.

There is no one set of rules for what a writing group should look like, except that it should meet the needs of its participants.

When forming a group, don't feel like you have to look for people who share your academic interests. Instead, look for people you trust. You can look outside your department or institution, too. Your group could be online. It does not need to be large: In fact, it may be more successful as a small group.

Remember: With a writing group, you are changing an individualistic culture and a way of thinking in academe, and not everyone is prepared to do that. Try to find people who share your philosophy on scholarly work and life.

The group may evolve as the members' needs change: perhaps initially meeting to read and evaluate each other's fellowship and grant applications, then relying more on videochats when fieldwork begins, and reforming again to talk through coding and analyzing data or helping each other develop daily writing habits.

In an academic environment characterized by many transient relationships and temporary alliances, a writing group can be something solid and enduring.

*Adapted from an essay by Louise Seamster, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.*

# How to Create a Successful Writing Group

It was midweek at that point of a semester when panic is setting in all around. I was supposed to be meeting with two job candidates, I had just returned from a conference, and I had plenty of legitimate and necessary tasks on my plate. Instead of doing any of that, I was staring at a manuscript I had not looked at in seven weeks.

Why? Because it was my turn in writing group. Because I will not violate the rule that we worked out years ago: No matter what, if it is your week in writing group, then you circulate something. Anything.

Our writing group emerged five years ago from despair, confessed on the sidewalk by three discouraged academics. Despair over never being able to get a project to successful completion. Despair over how to organize time for teaching, new course development, committee assignments, young families, and having some sort of recognizable life. Despair over whether there was anything worth saying and despair over whether we were actually capable of saying it.

Since that initial dejection, our groups has written and published multiple books and articles. One of us has had another child. All three of us have been granted tenure. And we all now remember why we like to write and why we entered a career that asked us not simply to explain interesting ideas to others, but to be a part of an interesting conversation.

Overcoming despair meant not just forming a writing group but also finding the right structure for it. Here are key factors that will help your group be a success:

- ✓ Key factors for a successful writing group.
- ✓ 4 inviolable rules.
- ✓ How to pick the right people.

## Hold regular meetings.

On the weeks that it is your turn to present, you (and only you) circulate your writing to the other members of your group, 48 hours before your scheduled meeting. The other members then read the draft and make written comments. When the members meet, those comments are shared and the piece is discussed in toto.

## Set some inviolable rules.

- Schedule a time every week for writing group, block off that time on your calendar at the beginning of the semester, and do not cancel it for last-minute meetings. This time has to be as important as a class. My group has met with infants in tow, sick children upstairs, and through crises both personal and professional. Only once have we gone on writing-group hiatus, and that was when one of our members was scheduled to have brain surgery. After her surgery we did not meet for about eight weeks.
- If it is your week to distribute writing, then you must circulate something. There is no backing out. No skipping and no trading places. You are trying to make writing — and the sharing of it — a regular routine. Recognize that you don't write just for publication, so you don't have to limit your sharing to full book chapters, conference papers, and articles. Share a draft of a tenure narrative or a proposal for a new major. Circulate hastily written paragraphs outlining initial ideas or revisions you've made to work the group already read.
- The responsibilities of writing group do not rest simply with the person circulating the writing. Other members of the group are equally responsible for reading and commenting carefully. Writing group is useless if the readers do not give the circulated work the attention it deserves.
- Your group should be composed of you and two other people. Three seems to be the magic number. Three gives enough people to have useful assessments, without too much disparate advice. Three keeps you focused, and three means the members of the group — like the legs on a stool — will keep it up and going. You would think that all of that could be accomplished with more than three people. But with more than three, the members start to think that the hard work of writing group will be done by others. Three people demands that everyone be on task.

## Pick the right participants.

You want people who are committed to making the group work. They don't necessarily have to be your friends. But you do need to trust them well well enough to share work that is not ready for publication. There is no point in having a writing group if perfection (or even being publication-ready) is your standard. Early drafts must be shared, and they may well be confused, disorganized, and unclear. It's hard on the ego to do that, and so being friends, or at least friendly, makes it easier to share works in progress.



A successful writing group is not a stage for proving how smart you are. You are not posing for one another or competing. During any given meeting, the writer might be allowed a few moments of self-flagellation. But then you get down to work: What would make this idea work? How might this paper be structured more effectively? How can this idea be highlighted because it seems to be the real focus of the argument?

You must find participants confident enough to talk honestly about their own work and someone else's. Do not choose a person who is always fixated on explaining why her work is terrible, and do not choose a person who is always giving reasons why no one understands the sophistication of his argument.

Do bring snacks.

While a writing group won't give you more hours in the day, make your kids' lunches, or grade your students' exams, it will give you a regular time set aside to discuss ideas, and a cohort to whom you are accountable.

*Adapted from an essay by Claire P. Curtis, an associate professor of political science at the College of Charleston.*

# An Online Alternative

While some lucky academics may have the luxury of attending a writer's retreat — perhaps one in the mountains of Vermont or in a European villa — the cost puts them out of reach for most of us. So what to do instead?

Host a writing group online. As with any writing group, the goal here is to use goal-setting and mild social pressure to help your writing process along. All you need is a blog.

Here's what to consider before you begin:

- **How long will the group last?** Twelve weeks maps nicely onto summer break, which is when we tend to do the majority of research and writing. On the other hand, it can be a long time for both the moderator and participants to maintain enthusiasm for weekly goal setting and reporting. In any case, think about what makes sense for your own goals and schedule.
- **What will you ask of participants?** Will they check in once a day? Once a week? Every two weeks? The frequency will likely vary according to the length of your writing group. Will participants be asked to engage with one another's work? Real-life writing groups usually consist of a group of scholars who periodically meet to read and critique each other's work. Instead of, or in addition to, having participants set weekly goals, you might use Google Docs to comment on one another's work, or set up a live chat session to discuss a draft face-to-face (more or less). The latter approach gives participants the opportunity to get valuable feedback, but requires a greater commitment from participants, and may not scale well for larger groups.
- **How will you encourage consistent participation?** Will you impose a penalty for participants who don't post updates? The group is voluntary, after all, but you need to find ways to encourage a sense of group solidarity. For example, you might organize a "work blast" on Twitter, where you all agree to sit down and write at the same time once during the week, and report your results.

Whether your writing group attracts five participants or 50, weekly goal-setting and reporting is a great way to keep yourself on track toward your summer goals. Not only that — when you're all done, you'll have a record of the work that you accomplished along the way.

*Adapted from an essay by Dan Royles, an assistant professor of history at Florida International University.*

# 7 Signs It's Time to Break Up With Your Writing Group

I love my writing group. I've been in my current writing group for eight years, and we've survived job changes, a marriage, a divorce, two babies, moves, professional ups and downs, and writing that runs the gamut from grants and academic articles to young adult novels, blog posts about Pluto, and news stories on robotic fish and the mating rituals of pea hens. It works for me.

I've been in six other writing groups over the past 20 or so years – some worked, and some didn't. Looking back, I could have saved myself time (and stress) if I'd just recognized these signs:

- 1. Your writing isn't moving forward.** When you're in a group, it's not always easy to assess what's working and what's not. But if you're not actually making progress and producing writing or publishing writing or getting better at revising your work, then the group is probably not working for you.
- 2. Your group is really a talking group.** I've been in a group that never seemed to get to the writing part. We vented and shared departmental gossip, or caught up on each other's social lives, or a person hijacked the conversation to share the latest workplace or relationship grievance. Whether a writing group is a feedback group or folks just show up and write together, if your writing isn't the focus, there's a problem. In my current group, we eat dinner and have about 20-30 minutes to chat and catch

✓ Some groups work; some groups don't.

✓ How to assess yours.

up on each other's lives, and then we get to the writing. Who brought writing? How many pages? Who wants to go first? We set a timer. We stick to it. We stay focused on the writing as the reason we're together. We're not just talking about the writing we'd like to be doing. We're working with the writing we're actually doing.

3. **Your group is all business.** I used to want writing groups to be merely transactional. I thought if I just showed up and shared my work that some kind of writing magic would happen and unlock the key to my writing problem. Then we'd go home. Maybe that works for some people, but for me writing groups that work are as much about relationships as the products we are creating. We meet at each other's houses. We have some wine. We talk through challenges that make writing difficult. Getting to know the person behind the writing helps us respond more thoughtfully to the writing itself.
4. **Your group is not business-y enough.** Someone needs to be in charge and herd the cats. Scheduling is the hardest part for my current group, but we've got one person who always gets the Doodle Poll rolling and sends friendly reminders. My most successful groups also set group goals and commitments — clearly defined goals like “we will show up weekly and write together for two hours” or “we will meet monthly and each bring 2-4 pages to share for feedback at each meeting.” We plan meetings and stick to them, even if we don't feel we are bringing our best work. One of the writers in my current group uses our meetings as deadlines for her blog posts. Sometimes she writes a draft the day we meet, but she meets the deadline every time.
5. **Your group is too critical or competitive.** In one of my ex-groups I felt like the group itself was working against my writing productivity. Members were one-upping each other. I like groups that celebrate each other's successes, writing or otherwise. I've also found it important to have ground rules for critiquing each other's work: “What I find helpful as a writer is ... ” and for readers to respect that. If the group critiques the writer, not the writing, it's time to get out.
6. **You realize no one is listening to you.** One of the most powerful aspects of sharing writing in a group is listening to what others have to say about my writing and also about their own. What has worked for them? What are they reading? How do they handle tough reviews? In my current writing group, we've become collaborators on a few projects, shared favorite reads, and suggested colleagues to contact for our writing projects. Writing groups work best for me when we expect to learn from each other.
7. **You don't really want to be there.** I don't want to have to drag myself to a meeting or just go through the motions to check it off a “to do” list. I wish I'd paid greater attention to that voice in my head that was telling me the group wasn't working.

When I shared a draft of this list with my current writing group, we talked together about why our group works for us and which signs would be deal-breakers — for me it's No. 1 and No. 7. Through our conversation I discovered that I didn't recognize the break-up signs with my ex-groups because I was unwilling to assess

whether a writing group was *actually* working for me. Instead, I clung to the unexamined belief that it *should* work, and I just kept on going to those meetings. And my writing stalled.

Writing groups are one strategy we can use to help us be (more) productive and engaged. But like any other writing strategy we might try, we need to be willing to assess whether it's working or not.

We need to be willing to say it's OK for writing groups to end. Then make a graceful exit.

*Adapted from an essay by Jennifer Abern-Dodson, an assistant professor of the practice in writing studies at Duke University.*



✓ **The Chronicle Productivity Guide to**

# Inner Obstacles

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# When Doubts Bedevil Your Writing

- ✓ Doubts and insecurities are common.
- ✓ Are your fears valid?
- ✓ Making peace with your demons.

**N**o amount of time, space, or energy will make you a more productive writer if you let your inner writing demons (that is, your secret fears and self-doubts) sabotage you. These demons can surface even when (and sometimes especially when) we are deploying effective writing strategies on a project we care about. They may manifest as unconscious, self-perpetuating assumptions about who we are and what our writing should be. If we allow them to take hold, they can petrify us and keep us from writing.

There is the magnum-opus demon (*My work must be magnificent!*); the hostile-reader demon (*My work must be impervious to every possible criticism!*); the impostor-syndrome demon (*But it might reveal me to be a fraud!*); and the compared-to-X demon (*I'm not measuring up!*). There are related lesser writing-process spirits, too, like the cleared-deck djinni (who claims that writing will be easy when my current distractions disappear); the perfect-first-sentence djinni (who assures me that once I know how to start, the rest will follow); and the need-more-research djinni (who whispers that I can never have enough relevant sources).

Once we identify them and see them for the insecurities they really are, they usually lose their power over us and crumble into dust. If we don't name them, though, they can emerge at various junctures in the writing process — when we choose a focus, apply for funding, gather our data, create a first draft, revise, and especially when we're preparing to submit or resubmit.



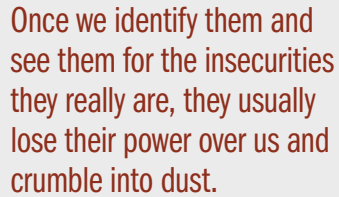
Other times they may manifest as thoughts and feelings we try to eradicate. We stuff them, hide from them, and try to bully them into leaving us alone. But as long as the demons that feed our doubts remain hidden, we remain blocked.

There's a Buddhist story about the futility of trying to overpower the fears that bedevil us. The monk Milarepa is trapped in a cave with demons, and he tries various ploys to get them to leave, to no avail. Then he remembers to open his heart, and invites his demons to talk with him over tea. They disappear. Our writing demons may evaporate once we face them, rather than fruitlessly denying their existence or trying to ward them off.

Once you know what you're up against, ask yourself: Are my fears or beliefs really valid? If they are, you can arm yourself accordingly and face them head-on. If they're not, then why not simply ignore them or let them go?

One thing's for sure: Wasting a lot of time and energy denying and avoiding your demons (and your writing) isn't going to exorcise them. So invite them to tea and get to know them. If they have something useful to say, take them seriously. But if they're just messing with your head and coming between you and your writing, then pay them no mind. Just remember, sitting down with your demons is the first step to freeing yourself.

*Adapted from an essay by Joli Jensen, a professor of media studies at the University of Tulsa and the author of Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics (University of Chicago Press, 2017).*



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# 4 Ways to Beat Writer's Block

Sometimes the classic formula for getting work done — just show up, sit down to write, force yourself not to bolt — simply doesn't work. You type. Reread what you've got. Delete it all. It is possible to end the day with a negative word count.

Plenty of writers come to believe when they experience such slumps that their work is not good enough and never will be. The closer they get to a deadline, the more frantic their anxiety and sense of doom.

To differing degrees, most writers experience these inevitable and awful periods. So it's not a question of whether you will get stuck but of what to do when it happens. Here are some things that might help.

- **Work up a sweat.** That inveterate walker, Henry David Thoreau, was just one among many who believed that physical activity leads to intellectual productivity. Today there's scientific work to back that idea up. Your sport of choice might involve running, bouncing a ball, riding a bike, or sticking an oar in the water. Getting out of your chair, especially when the weather is dreary, might be the last thing you want to do, but it does help.
- **Take a quick trip.** A change of venue often shakes things loose. Just a weekend away — camping or visiting friends and not thinking about work — can act as a restart. If you force yourself to take time off, you might be surprised at how eager you are to get back to work.
- **Just keep at it.** If you don't have the time, energy, and money to get out of town, try sticking to your writing routine. Go to your desk and sit there. Type. Even just typing "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" might get you going again. Typing, not writing, can eventually lead to something. Stare at a blank page until you can't bear it for another minute, and then continue to sit there — it might force you to write a paragraph you can use.
- **Heed Anne Lamott's clarion call.** In her 1994 book on writing, *Bird by Bird*, Lamott offered famous advice: Write a "shitty first draft." This is always a good idea. It frees you up to know that what you're writing can and will be terrible. Out of that load of muck you can usually pull out a golden kernel. Drafts too shitty to be saved can usually be mined for at least a couple of useful bits.

Remember: Even when you're not writing, your brain is still churning like a background app. When the ideas and the words start flowing again, it's easy to forget how stuck you were.

We all know writers who seem to have it all, to whom everything comes, and comes easily. They never struggle to meet deadlines, and their sentences can make you wince with jealousy.

Here's the secret: Even they get stuck.

*Adapted from an essay by Rachel Toor, a professor of creative writing at Eastern Washington University's writing program in Spokane.*

# Stalled? Try Writing From the Inside Out

**W**hether you're a humanist, social scientist, or a STEM researcher, you hear the same message, repeated like a drumbeat: "Get it out there!" The tremendous pressure to complete quality research and then send manuscripts out quickly can warp the writing process. In such a frantic atmosphere, even rigorously trained academics who care deeply about their topics can find themselves working from the outside in, rather than the reverse.

What does that mean? When the heat is on to publish, you cast around for ideas. Maybe you consider some research from your dissertation that you could frame in a new light. A related topic you've been teaching might work interestingly with that old material. You arrive at what seems like a great idea and then hammer out an abstract or a book proposal.

Yet no matter how many buzzwords you've used from your field, those abstracts and proposals don't seem to lead to the production of actual manuscripts. Driven by a sense of intense pressure to get quick results — or at least generate interest from journal editors or university presses — you may jump over critical stages in developing your arguments, testing out ideas, and examining the evidence. Another risk is that you may become so attuned to external factors, such as hot topics in your discipline, that your internal voice — the core of who you are as a scholar, what you find most compelling, and what you think your fields should pay more attention to — is drowned out.

The upshot: When you turn to actually drafting your

- ✓ Learn to recognize your internal voice.
- ✓ Choose the right time and space.
- ✓ Try "prewriting" techniques.

manuscript, you're apt to run into intellectual roadblocks and argumentative dead ends.

Working from the outside in can be seductive because it makes you feel initially like you've made progress. But all too soon, you find yourself stuck, unable to really develop your ideas and write.

## You Need to Work From the Inside Out

Working from the inside out means your work is propelled by the questions and dilemmas intrinsic to the project itself. And your work is guided by your own internal compass as a scholar — what you care about most.

On a practical level, working from the inside out often means immersing yourself in the essential texts and theoretical approaches to your discipline. It means allowing yourself time to identify gaps and to test your intuitions about why those gaps exist or how they might be filled. All of that work is in the service of staking your intellectual claim — making your contribution to your field — or uncovering new areas that deserve evaluation.

The most effective way to work from the inside out is to use a variety of prewriting activities to help you discover the argument you truly want to make, and why it matters. More on prewriting in a moment. First you need to set the stage for when and where you will do the work. It's essential to make your project a weekly priority. An effective, supportive structure for your writing requires two elements:

- **Regular time in your schedule.** Making that time can be a real challenge when you're juggling teaching and service with research, but the first step toward taking control of your own process is to carve out regular space each week on your calendar to do the work. You don't have to work on your project or write every single day. In the midst of a busy semester, set aside an hour two mornings a week and three hours on a weekend afternoon. Establishing a habit of working even five hours every week will, over the course of the academic year, provide time to construct the necessary building blocks for your project. That means reading deeply, analyzing data, synthesizing and interpreting findings — all hallmarks of writing from the inside out.
- **A dedicated work space.** You need a safe place to experiment with ideas. And that doesn't just mean the safety of an office with a locked door. You also need a mental space where you can try out approaches and arguments free from a sense of looming critique. Several prewriting activities provide just such a safe space for the gestational stage.

## The Necessity of Prewriting

Good writing depends on being able to clearly articulate the purpose and argument of your project. To help chart your course and make it as efficient as possible, I recommend a technique called prewriting. It is an umbrella term for any writing you do before outlining or actually drafting your manuscript, and might take the form of free writing, journaling, note taking, or some combination of the three.

- **Free write to generate ideas.** To get started, try doing some free writing focused on a particular question related to your topic. Remember, this is private writing for your eyes only. And you can do it by hand or on a computer or other device. Give yourself a limited amount of time — from 5 to 20 minutes, for example — to jot down your thoughts without censoring or judging them in any way. Simply explore where they lead. This kind of exploratory writing is a fantastic way to launch an internal dialogue that can help shape elements of your ultimate manuscript. While some of your free writing will end up (deservedly) in the waste bin, you will also discover ideas and strategies you weren't consciously aware of before the exercise. The gems mined from this internal conversation can help you see specific steps to strengthen your evidence and realize more compelling ways of framing and presenting it.
- **Keep a professional journal.** In her book *Journal Keeping: How to Use Reflective Writing for Learning, Teaching, Professional Insight, and Positive Change*, Dannelle D. Stevens, a professor at Portland State University, encourages writers to experiment with keeping a professional journal. You can focus your journal on a particular project or use it as a space to think through the connections among your various projects. It can be a place to brainstorm about the big picture of your work and consider to what degree other commitments are interfering with your writing. Your journal can also help you make choices about what to focus on and what to step back from. It can even be a place to make to-do lists for your various scholarly projects and look for opportunities to save time, like planning courses that incorporate texts you're working with in your scholarship.
- **Take notes on your reactions.** Scholars, of course, regularly take notes that summarize information from sources. But another step in working on a project from the inside out is to blend information-gathering with making notes to yourself with your initial thoughts about those sources. As you read and take fact-related notes, jot down your questions, doubts, and points of agreement or disagreement. Note places in your own argument where a dialogue with this material could enhance your own work. Perhaps you might be able to engage this source in a particular section of your manuscript, such as the literature review, analysis, or discussion section. The point is: You are weighing your sources against your own ideas. You're not just recording data or quotes you may use in your project; you're developing a dialogue with your sources.

Whatever form your prewriting takes, you do not have to limit yourself to narrative text or prose. If you're a visual thinker, you may benefit from sketching out concept maps that show clusters of ideas and visually represent their relationship. Experimenting with drawing schematics can help you see the common denominators, so to speak, of your ideas and come closer to articulating the overarching ideas driving your project.

Once you've done enough inside work to clearly see the purpose and scope of your project, you're ready to take it to the outside world and begin articulating your argument for external audiences.

*Adapted from an essay by Amy Benson Brown, a writing coach who works with faculty authors through Academic Coaching & Writing.*

# The 10 Habits of Highly Effective Writers

- ✓ “Writer’s block” is a crutch.
- ✓ Make deadlines work for you.
- ✓ Keep multiple projects going at once.

**W**hen someone’s doing a lot more than you, you notice it. It brings out your petty jealousy. Which is, let’s face it, ridiculous. The fact that another writer is working hard and well should be nothing more than inspiration, or at least a gentle prod.

What are the personality traits and habits that help people crank out the pages?

**They don’t make excuses.** It’s a lot easier to say that the muse has gone AWOL than to admit that writing is hard and requires discipline and sacrifice. When the going gets hard, productive writers reject the notion of “writer’s block” the way others shun gluten.

**They show up, punch the clock, and punch out.** They give themselves a quota; sometimes it’s butt-in-chair time, sometimes a word count. Simple math allows you to figure out how quickly 1,000 words a day adds up to a book-length work. These writers know how to use deadlines, whether external or self-imposed, to stay on track.

**They believe in themselves and their work.** Perhaps it’s confidence, perhaps it’s Quixote-like delusion, but to be a prolific writer you have to believe that what you’re doing matters. If you second-guess at every step, you’ll soon be going backward. You have to be willing to risk seeming narcissistic and arrogant, even if you don’t like to think of yourself that way. The work takes priority.

Along with the necessary arrogance and narcissism, a dollop of self-hatred goes a long way toward getting stuff

done. You have to believe it's your job to be productive and to feel bad if you're not.

**They know that a lot of important stuff happens when they're not “working.”** Productive writers have been through the cycle enough to know it's a cycle, and sometimes you figure out problems while you're walking the dog. They know to trust that and don't get twitchy when the pages stop piling up.

**They're passionate about their projects.** Too much scholarly work is obviously produced without heat. Productive people become impatient and seek out new thrills. They like to learn stuff.

Chipping away at something for years or decades can lead to a pile of dust or to a finely made and intricately tooled piece of art. It's often hard to know which one you're working toward. It can help to delude yourself into channeling Donatello or Brancusi even if what you're looking at seems like a bunch of shavings.

**They read a lot, and widely.** Reading becomes a get-psyched activity for writing. Anyone who's ever assigned (or done) an exercise in imitation knows that.

**They know how to finish a draft.** As with relationships, beginnings are exciting and easy, full of hope and promise. Middles can get comfortable. You fall into a routine and, for a while, that can be its own kind of fun. But then many of us hit a wall. Whether it's disillusion, boredom, or self-doubt, we crash into a wall. Productive authors know that they have to keep going through the hard parts and finish a complete draft. At least you've got something to work from.

**They work on more than one thing at once.** Of course, when you hit that wall, it's tempting to give up and start on something new and exciting. While that can lead to a sheaf of unfinished drafts, it can also be useful. Some pieces need time to smolder. Leaving them to turn to something short and manageable makes it easier to go back to the big thing. Fallowing and crop rotation lead to a greater harvest.

**They leave off at a point where it will be easy to start again.** Some writers quit a session in the middle of a sentence; it's always easier to continue than to begin. If you know where you're headed the next time you sit down, you'll get there faster. There's an activation-energy cost to get things brewing. Lower it however you can.

**They know there are no shortcuts,** magic bullets, special exercises, or incantations. There are no tricks to make it easier, just habits and practices you can develop to get it done.

*Adapted from an essay by Rachel Toor, a professor of creative writing at Eastern Washington University, in Spokane, and a former acquisitions editor at Oxford University Press and Duke University Press.*

# The Tough-Love Approach to Writing

- ✓ The four phases of writing.
- ✓ Revising and writing are not the same.
- ✓ The value of “writing blocks.”

**D**uring scheduled “writing time,” are you necessarily writing? Maybe you’re “outlining” or “reading articles” or “organizing your notes”—all of which are necessary components of the writing process. But they aren’t the same as writing.

There are other hours in the day to accomplish those supporting tasks. “Writing time” should be devoted to producing new words on a page. That’s it.

Many academic writers don’t necessarily make any distinction between the different phases of writing. Here are four:

- Research (which includes reading and notetaking)
- Writing (the production of new text)
- Editing/revising (the rereading and restructuring of old text)
- Copy-editing (the pleasurable task of fixing minor grammatical, spelling, and formatting errors in an otherwise solid final draft)

The four phrases overlap a bit but remain distinct actions with very different purposes. Prep time is for reading and doing research. Revising time is for rewriting, restructuring, and copy-editing. And writing time is for new writing. Mix up those distinct actions, and you can spend countless hours earmarked for “writing” and yet have no new words on a page to show for it.



It can be needling to hear that you need a scheduled time devoted solely to producing new words on the page. But academics who don't set aside blocks of time for writing often seem to spend countless hours doing things to "prepare to write" and then never getting any actual writing done.

We all know how easy it is to slip into rapturous research instead. Reading is, on the whole, always a more pleasurable thing to do than writing. And that's just a blanket truth. Writing is many things, but it is rarely "fun."

Using your writing time to do research or line editing is a crutch. Here are some common arguments faculty and graduate students make about why they can't possibly write new words during their scheduled writing sessions.

**Argument:** "I need to read in order to write. That should still count as writing time."

**Rebuttal:** Technically, that is true. But reading is comparatively easy to do and can be squeezed into much shorter amounts of time. You can — and should — be reading for your writing. But not while you are writing. If you block off a precious three hours to write or revise and then spend 2.5 of those hours reading other people's words, you are preparing to write, but you are not actually writing. Reading and research are conducive to formulating thoughts, but shouldn't be done during the time you've scheduled to actually write out your own arguments or revise them.

**Argument:** "But I need to edit as I write. That's just how I write."

**Rebuttal:** No, you do not need to edit as you write. Editing is not, in fact, writing. It's editing. It's often our pesky internal editor that keeps us from writing at all. If your first drafts take you forever, that is probably because — instead of getting half-formed words out of your brain and onto the page — you have written a single sentence or paragraph and then spent hours allowing yourself to agonize over its word choice or sentence structure. Just don't do it. Save editing for later. If you don't rein in your editor as you craft your first drafts, you will never learn to write faster or more efficiently. And writing quickly is, for better or worse, necessary in this academic climate.

**Argument:** "Revision and writing are the same thing! How can I separate them?"

**Rebuttal:** Again, technically, that is correct. Sort of. Revising a first draft often requires you to produce new sections, rewrite paragraphs, and recraft sentences. And revising is writing, of course. But it's not the type of writing that you should be doing when you set aside an hour just for "writing." Block off different times for revising until you become a writing ninja. Just by forcing yourself to think of writing as separate from revising, and scheduling time for both, you will become a more productive and proficient writ-

er. Why? Because this forces you to have multiple writing projects in play at once. Working on several writing projects at once allows you to reignite your creativity and thinking as you switch modes and subjects. And it often generates new ideas. If you have 30 minutes left in a writing block and you're done with your main writing task for that day, free write.

Once you've mastered the art of using a block of writing time to produce new words, you can start mixing writing and revising time together. But until then, try to keep those activities separate. Even if you're dubious, try it for a week or two. You'll be shocked at how much writing you can do when you use your writing time to actually write.

*Adapted from an essay by Theresa MacPhail, an assistant professor in the science and technology studies program at the Stevens Institute of Technology.*

## When It's OK to Be Late

Perennially postponing everything until the last minute, especially for the doctoral student and the probationary faculty member, can be a career killer. That's why breaking big projects into smaller pieces with interim deadlines and resisting perfectionism are so important.

But procrastination is not always bad: Sometimes the best ideas just come late. And sometimes the work you put off doing is better left undone. In fact, there are times when your guiding principle should be "better never than late." Some of the world's most successful people — whether inventors, military strategists, politicians, or entrepreneurs — have learned that quitting can be the smart move.

When you find yourself continuously stymied, when problem after problem delays you, when you seem to have lost your enthusiasm for some venture, maybe you *should* just give up. Knowing when to quit one project, walk away, and start a new one is a key survival skill in our trade.

The longevity of our enterprise means new discoveries or developments might allow you to resurrect a project abandoned long ago. Don't be afraid to return later, when the time is right.

Put off *everything* until the last minute, and you will perennially fall behind, disappoint others, and hurt your reputation. But sometimes putting off is better than going with something that is truly not ready for the classroom or the journal.

*Adapted from an essay by David D. Perlmutter, dean of the College of Media and Communication at Texas Tech University.*

# When Less Writing Time Is More

**W**hen participants at a writing retreat in Yosemite National Park learned that they would be writing for only two and a half hours each day, many were surprised. “Isn’t this a writing retreat?” they asked. “I am a slow writer — can I skip the afternoon activities so that I can get in more writing?”

It is normal to expect that the more hours you spend on a task, the more productive you will be. However, writing is different. It’s like hauling stones: When you haul stones, you deplete your physical energy. If you haul stones all day, the following day you will be tired and able to haul fewer stones.

Your intellectual energy can be a bit delicate. Have you ever spent an entire day working on a project only to find that the next day you are unable to move forward? Have you ever pushed yourself to the limit to meet a deadline and found yourself unable to be productive for the next week or longer? When that happens, it is because you have pushed your intellectual energy to the limit. You have hit a wall and need time to recover.

By limiting your writing time, you’re more likely to wake up each day fresh and ready to move forward.

Here are three ways to make the most of your writing time:

- 1. When you do sit down to write, focus completely on your work.** Turn off your phone, and step away from email, the Web, and social media. For many people, the best time to write is first thing in the morning

- ✓ Conserve your energy.
- ✓ Figure out how many hours a day of writing is optimal for you.
- ✓ Make the most of your writing time.

— before checking email or Facebook. Try writing for at least an hour before looking at your email or social-media accounts.

2. **Use a timer as you write to see how much time you are actually writing, as opposed to looking for distractions.** Turn the timer off each time you are distracted by anything not directly related to your writing.
3. **When you write first thing in the morning, and then stop writing for the rest of the day, your mind will continue to process thoughts related to your project.** You may be surprised about the revelations you have about your writing when you are not writing. If you carry a notepad with you, you can get them down on paper.

To figure out how many writing-hours each day is the right amount for you, many writing coaches recommend using a writing journal. Here's how:

Each time you begin a writing session, keep track of the exact number of minutes you spend writing. Tally those minutes up at the end of each day. Also write down what you accomplished that day and what you expect to do the following day. At the end of the week, look back over your journal, add up the minutes you spent writing, divide that by five, and aim to spend the same amount of time writing the following week. Repeat until you have a good idea of how much writing you can reasonably do every day on a regular basis.

By writing for fewer hours a day, you're not shirking work but protecting your intellectual energy and ensuring that it gets renewed daily. It's a case of "less is more."

*Adapted from an essay by Tanya Golash-Boza, an associate professor of sociology at the University of California at Merced.*

✓ **The Chronicle Productivity Guide to**

# Improving Your Writing

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# 7 Tips to Write Less Badly

- ✓ Emphasize output over input.
- ✓ Pick a “puzzle.”
- ✓ Learn to start small.

**M**ost academics spend much of our time writing. But we aren’t as good at it as we should be. Very talented people sometimes fail because they couldn’t, or didn’t, write. And some much less talented people do OK because they learned how to write.

It’s hard to write well. Fortunately, the standards of writing in most disciplines are so low that you don’t need to — you merely need to write less badly. Here are some tips:

- 1. Set goals based on output, not input.** “I will work for three hours” is a delusion; “I will type three double-spaced pages” is a goal. After you write three pages, do something else. Prepare for class, teach, go to meetings, whatever. If later in the day you feel like writing some more, great. But if you don’t, then at least you wrote something.
- 2. Give yourself time.** Many smart people tell themselves pathetic lies like, “I do my best work at the last minute.” It’s not true. No one works better under pressure. Sure, you are a smart person. But if you are writing about a profound problem, why would you think that you can make an important contribution off the top of your head in the middle of the night just before the conference?

Writers sit at their desks for hours, wrestling with ideas. They ask questions, talk with other smart people over drinks or dinner, go on long walks. And then write a whole bunch more. Don’t worry that what you

write is not very good and isn't immediately usable. You get ideas when you write; you don't just write down ideas.

The articles and books that will be read decades from now were written by men and women sitting at a desk and forcing themselves to translate profound ideas into words and then to let those words lead them to even more ideas. Writing can be magic, if you give yourself time, because you can produce in the mind of some other person, distant from you in space or even time, an image of the ideas that exist in only your mind at this one instant.

- 3. Pick a puzzle.** Portray, or even conceive, of your work as an answer to a puzzle. There are many interesting types of puzzles:
  - “X and Y start with the same assumptions but reach opposing conclusions. How?”
  - “Here are three problems that all seem different. Surprisingly, all are the same problem, in disguise. I'll tell you why.”
  - “Theory predicts [something]. But we observe [something else]. Is the theory wrong, or is there some other factor we have left out?”Don't stick too closely to those formulas, but they are helpful in presenting your work to an audience, whether that audience is composed of listeners at a lecture or readers of an article.

- 4. Write, then squeeze the other things in.** Put your writing ahead of your other work. If you are a “morning person,” write early in the day. You may be a “night person” or something in between. Just make sure you get in the habit of reserving your most productive time for writing. Don't do it as an afterthought or tell yourself you will write when you get a big block of time. Squeeze the other things in; the writing comes first.

- 5. Not all of your thoughts are profound.** Many people get frustrated because they can't get an analytical purchase on the big questions that interest them. Then they don't write at all. So start small. The wonderful thing is that you may find that you have traveled quite a long way up a mountain, just by keeping your head down and putting one writing foot ahead of the other for a long time. It is hard to refine your questions, define your terms precisely, or know just how your argument will work until you have actually written it all down.

- 6. Your most profound thoughts are often wrong.** Or, at least, they are not completely correct. Precision in asking your question, or posing your puzzle, will not come easily if the question is hard.

New graduate students often think they know what they want to work on and what they will write about for their dissertations. But nearly all of the best

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scholars are profoundly changed by their experiences in doing research and writing about it. They learn by doing, and sometimes what they learn is that they were wrong.

- 7. Edit your work, over and over.** Have other people look at it. One of the great advantages of academe is that we are mostly all in this together, and we all know the terrors of that blinking cursor on a blank background. Exchange papers with peers or a mentor, and when you are sick of your own writing, reciprocate by reading their work. You need to get over a fear of criticism or rejection. Nobody's first drafts are good. The difference between a successful scholar and a failure need not be better writing. It is often more editing.

*Adapted from an essay by Michael C. Munger, a professor of political science at Duke University.*



# Find the Best Structure for Your Argument

All writers struggle with structure. Finding the best organization for an argument — whether you’re working on an article, a conference paper, a dissertation chapter, a book chapter, or a massive project like your first academic book — is one of the most difficult tasks an author can face.

Structure is a pernicious issue in both the writing and editing stages of academic work. Typically, problems with the overall organization of your text become clearly visible only once you’ve drafted enough of something to realize that it might be a hot mess. The problem of finding your structure can feel depressing and unwieldy precisely because it often seems impossible to fix without starting over from scratch. Since writing is thinking, by the end of your first draft, you most likely already have something that contains most of the pieces you’ll need to craft a really great piece of work. But how do you discover the best possible arrangement for those pieces?

The secret is to take a step back from the granular level. Stop rereading and rewriting individual segments — that won’t help you very much at this stage. What you need to do is to get some perspective on your argument and the narrative as a whole. To do that effectively, you’re going to have to go back to basics.

- ✓ Step back and gain perspective.
- ✓ Identify gaps in your thinking.
- ✓ Learn the “Humpty Dumpty Method.”

The good news is: Finding your structure can actually be one of the most fun and rewarding parts of writing. No, really, I mean it. If you can let go of the need for something to be perfect or brilliant or amazing on the first or second draft and also learn to let go of how you first envisioned the flow of the text, you'll probably end up with a stronger, better-crafted piece of writing.

Here are some of the strategies that I recommend to dissertation writers when they get stuck on a particularly difficult chapter. If you think these suggestions sound too “simplistic” for advanced academic work — or, as one of my advisees once opined, you think they are reminiscent of kindergarten crafts — try them out anyway. Play can be a good thing when you're struggling with your writing. And you might be surprised by the results.

**Strategy No. 1:** Reverse outlining. Print out the entire draft and break out your red pen. In the margins, jot down each paragraph's main idea. If it has more than one, flag it. If it doesn't seem to have a concrete purpose, flag that, too.

Once you're finished, look at the “outline” of the piece. Get rid of paragraphs that don't “fit” the argument you're making. Split up paragraphs that are trying to do too many things at once. Notice how many paragraphs are descriptive or analytic; you may notice that you have far more theory or evidence for one section of your piece than for the others. The point of the reverse outline is to help you spot all the gaps in your thinking, the problems with the development of your main thesis, and the weaknesses in your overall organization, not to mention any messy paragraphs or poor transitions. Constructing a reverse outline will highlight the mechanics of your text and force you to focus on the big picture without getting lost in all the details.

If reverse outlining doesn't do the trick, and you find yourself frustrated and still wrangling with an overly long, data-rich piece of writing, I strongly recommend ...

**Strategy No. 2:** The “Humpty Dumpty Method.” This is where frustration gets fun. If you've very long chapters, this one is especially for you — you may actually have two or three different arguments smashed together.

The Humpty Dumpty Method requires a full printout of your text. It also requires a large, flat space — either a conference room table or a floor will do.

- Step one: Take a pair of scissors and cut your text up into individual paragraphs. I'm serious.
- Step two: Throw them around. Mess them up.
- Step three: Now try to put them back together again. If you can't do this easily, either your original argument isn't strong enough or the original structure really isn't working. This method allows you to see how the pieces of your argument are or are not “connecting” to each other in a logical, coherent fashion. It also allows you to “cut and paste” away from the computer screen, freeing you to play with the order of sections or paragraphs without committing to anything. Does this section work better here or there? Move it. See if it “fits” better somewhere else.

- Step four: Once you're certain that paragraphs are in the right order, start taping them back together again. This allows you to visualize the concrete sections of your thesis. Then you can move entire parts of your argument around to see if they "flow" better in a new order. This strategy is fun and freeing and can help you to visualize your structure in new ways.

Visualization off the computer screen is important. When I asked him for his own strategies, Ryan Sloan, a novelist and seasoned writing lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley, reminded me that it's important to think about structure before writing, as well as after completing the first draft. "It can be tough to visualize your own arguments when you have so much material, each with its own voice," Sloan said. "The advice I give my students: Avoid the computer and the dreaded first page before drafting. Instead, buy some sticky notes and grab a whiteboard."

**Ryan Sloan's Strategy No. 3:** Use big, colored sticky notes and colored markers as you research. Keep track of your evidence as you go: analysis, source, and concepts or categories. Before or after you write (depending on if you're writing or revising), pull out all the notes and get yourself to a smooth wall or whiteboard. Arrange and rearrange the material in clusters. The whiteboard allows you to draw relationships and note reflections or questions. Sloan recommends that you "take a picture with your phone to save a record, erase, and start again." This approach allows you to "see" the best structure for your argument emerge right in front of you.

I also asked the Pushcart Prize-winning author and writing coach Steve Adams for his sage advice on this issue. Echoing some of the points above, he also reminds his students that all pieces of writing — even academic texts — have a story arc. He has students "draw out their story arc on long pieces of white paper that they can then hang onto their wall so they can get a sense of the whole shape of the piece."

**Steve Adams's Strategy No. 4:** Write a sentence or two describing the main arguments in a chapter, or just the gist of the information it contains, and move the pieces around to see how they might be most meaningful. Then put your chapter (or book) in that sequence and give it a read-through. If it's not perfect (and it won't be), go through the process again. Adams admits, "I had to do that four times with my last novel."

Finally, both Sloan and Adams concur that experimentation is important to the overall revision process. Writing is messy. "Like you, I encourage my students to play," Adams told me. "And to make a mess. And to not attempt perfection or brilliance. *It won't be brilliant.* It can't be. Brilliance comes from coming back to the draft you've coughed up, solving problems that you couldn't even see the first time through, making pass after pass."

Every writer — at every level — struggles with finding structure. When you're exasperated or exhausted, try breaking out your craft supplies and have some fun.

*Adapted from an essay by Theresa MacPhail, an assistant professor in the science and technology studies program at the Stevens Institute of Technology.*

# The Art and Science of Finding Your Voice

- ✓ Voice is more than just style.
- ✓ Free writing and wide reading can help.
- ✓ Envision your audience.

**A**t an early stage of your academic writing career, there's a not-insignificant chance that someone — an editor, a reviewer, a trusted peer — is going to tell you that you need to work on finding your voice. This comment will typically be couched in general editorial feedback on something you're trying to publish. You may hear that “your voice” is not coming through on the page, or that “you” are not in the text enough, or that your argument is somehow lost in a cacophony of competing voices or arguments.

The consternation that an author feels when she is first asked to find her voice is natural. This is a reflection of the fact that *there is absolutely no consensus about what “voice” is*. That's the dirty secret all experienced writers eventually learn, and that's why finding your voice is such a difficult task.

Voice is frequently conflated with an author's style of writing. Sometimes it is described as akin to a writer's unique authorial fingerprint. If an author has a distinctive “voice,” then we can often accurately attribute a text to its correct author even if her identity is concealed. Somehow we just know who wrote it. This is what “voice” encapsulates: an author's habitual turn of phrase, her particular way of organizing a text, his certain way with description or analysis.

In other words, voice is related to prose style, but it also encapsulates more than just prose style. Voice is a reflection of how a writer sounds when he “talks” to his readers.

To “find” your voice, practice these six key techniques and exercises. They will help you speed up the process of finding and developing your distinctive voice. The first technique is the simplest and most powerful.

- 1. Free write.** Free writing is a wonderful tool for discovering your voice (and for identifying your arguments). It requires you to sit down with a blank piece of paper or a blank document on your screen. You won’t have any other pieces of text to work with. No notes, no quotes, no evidence, no data. Just you and your thoughts. Write for 15 to 20 minutes without stopping. No backspacing or deleting or rearranging. Write whatever comes into your head — even if it’s “I don’t know what I’m writing.”

If you are working on an article or a book chapter, picture your reader — really envision her. You are talking to this person on the page. So talk to her. What do you need her to know about your subject? Give her some context, some background. But don’t talk forever and don’t overwhelm her with details. Then start describing — in your own words — what your argument is. Walk her through it.

It can be helpful to do this exercise whenever you begin a new piece of writing. It also works wonders when you are stuck on something. But it is crucial to discovering your own words on a subject.

- 2. Read more.** Always be reading. When you’re writing, it’s helpful to have a handful of writers you admire “on deck.” Stack a few key books or essays you love on your desk. Occasionally pick them up and read a few passages. But read them like a writer. Tear them apart like an engineer would take apart a machine in order to know how it works.

Ask questions like: How did the author do it? Are the sentences long or short here? Is the writing clear or playful? What is the tone? How is the argument arranged? Is this structured in sections or not? Try to mimic the styles that you most esteem. Eventually, you’ll craft your own unique voice out of the hodgepodge of other styles that you’ve admired.

There is absolutely no consensus about what “voice” is.

Also, read outside your field and your genre. Pick up a thriller and try to learn how the author moves the story along. Read a cooking blog and see how the author describes the complicated steps for preparing a dish or how she manages to make her particular recipe for macaroni and cheese seem exotic and new. Peruse long, investigative magazine articles to see how to construct a tight narrative arc in a relatively short amount of space. There are tricks of the trade to be learned from anything you read. Eventually, if you read enough while you’re writing, you’ll pick up your “voice” almost by osmosis.

- 3. Write every day.** Even if it’s only for a few minutes. Don’t get out of the habit. A writer’s voice develops in only one fashion — through continuous usage. The more you write, the more you’ll refine your skills. The more you revise and edit, the more you’ll see your own style start to emerge from the page.

4. **Talk, don't write.** Try using voice-recognition software or a tape recorder and talk out your arguments. This is a great way to begin to recognize your own voice by literally hearing it.
5. **Share your early drafts.** Be open to feedback, even if it's critical. It may hurt, but it's often the best way to mature as a writer. If you think your writing comes across a certain way, but no one who reads your work agrees, you need to listen to them. Readers will let you know how your words sound to them. Gather as much feedback as you can, especially early on in your career. Readers can help you spot your strengths and weaknesses as a writer.
6. **Trust your instincts.** You have to trust yourself to know when you're good, when you need work, and when you're talking utter nonsense. If you write every day, you should start to develop a pretty good feel for how you — and only you — write about your subject. Be honest with yourself, but be fair. Following your gut instinct about how best to write a particular piece of text will very often directly reveal your voice. After all, only you know how to write like you.

And when you finally find your voice, you'll know it.

*Adapted from an essay by Theresa MacPhail, an assistant professor in the science and technology studies program at Stevens Institute of Technology.*

# The ‘So What’ Question

**B**efore you send in an article or book manuscript, ask yourself the following question: What is my main argument here?

That might seem like basic-level stuff. You didn’t get this far in academe without knowing how to craft a thesis statement. This advice isn’t for you.

Let me assure you, it probably is. A lack of argument and poor organizational structure are much more widespread problems, at all levels of scholarship, than they should be. This is depressing, but true.

Here are the top three signs that you may not have a solid central argument — even when you think you already do.

**You can’t answer the “So what?” question.** Editors will often write “So what?” in the margins of a piece to indicate that the author hasn’t explained why something matters. A good central argument will not only answer that question, but also tell your audience what you’re going to argue, how, and why. A good text answers the “So what?” question for the reader — it doesn’t just tell us a bunch of interesting facts and then ask us to sort them out by ourselves. Academic articles and books are not written like mysteries: You shouldn’t have to wait until Page 15 of a 17-page article — or until the final chapter of a book — to learn the point of the piece. Often, manuscripts lacking a strong argument have a nascent one buried in their conclusions.

- ✓ Do your intro and conclusion mesh?
- ✓ Can your colleagues summarize your argument?
- ✓ The big one: Who cares?

**Your introduction and conclusion don't mesh.** Reread your opening and closing sections together and highlight the main argument and supporting claims. If you can't do that — or if they don't match — then you don't have a central thesis. If you have three or four arguments in the introduction (or, God forbid, more), then decide which one you'll give primacy and which ones are sub-arguments. Your overarching argument may be made up of sub-arguments and ancillary claims, but there should be something that ties all those multiple arguments and claims together. It's the bright red thread that connects all the various pieces into a beautifully interwoven text. It's what you keep looping back to, and what allows the reader to follow your argument all the way through. (Cautionary note: The red thread is not simply the subject of your text, it's the framing theoretical argument. Sure, every chapter of your book talks about the threat of extinction of pink dolphins, but that's not an argument. The red thread tells us why we should bother to read an entire book on pink dolphins.)

**Your colleagues can't explain your main argument.** Have people you trust (like your writing partner) read your introduction and tell you what they think your central argument is. If they had to finish this sentence — “This article/book argues that ... ” — what would they say? If their description doesn't match what you think you've argued, then you have some work to do (assuming you've picked smart people). Go back and fix your structure and prose to reflect the actual argument you want to make. If they can't find your main argument, then they will likely ask you some terrific questions that will lead you to it. Readers are terrifically helpful like that, which is why it's so crucial to find one or two people who are willing to look over your drafts.

*Adapted from an essay by Theresa MacPhail, an assistant professor in the science and technology studies program at Stevens Institute of Technology.*

Depressing but true: Lack of argument and poor structure are much more widespread than they should be.



## ✓ The Chronicle Productivity Guide to

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# What to Expect From a Publisher

- ✓ What it means when an editor is “interested.”
- ✓ The 6 key elements of a proposal.
- ✓ Tips for communicating with a publisher.
- ✓ What happens post-publication.

**H**aving now spent more of my career as an author than I did as a book editor, I can tell you this: It’s far more fun to be an author. What I also know is that time spent working in publishing is the best training a writer can get. Of course most academics won’t have that option. So I’d like to share some things I learned about publishing that may help you figure out how to approach a publisher and maintain a good relationship.

## **What does it mean when an editor is “interested”?**

Plenty of academics equate an editor’s polite expression of interest with a promise to publish. But book and journal editors are, by nature, “interested” — in things, in ideas, in people, in potential book projects. If you approach them at a conference, run into them at a bar, and tell them about the project you’re working on, provided it’s reasonably close to a field in which they publish, they are going to act interested. They most likely will be. They will certainly say they are.

In some rare cases, an editor will give you a clear and blanket no. Publishing tends to work by category: If a press doesn’t do books in your category, you shouldn’t want to publish with it. If you’re told, “We don’t publish classical philology” (or we don’t do memoirs, fiction, or *Festschriften*), take it as a no and don’t try to convince the editor otherwise. Most of the time, though, if you run into an editor at a conference in your discipline, he or she is likely to be publishing books in that field.

Even if you describe the world’s most boring, narrow, marketless monograph, most editors won’t want to take the

chance of missing out on something that could be good. They'll say, "That sounds interesting. I'd like to see it."

Here's the good news. You've gotten the name of a real person at a real press, and you can write a cover letter reminding her that she asked to see the manuscript. But what are the odds that the conversation will lead to publication? You wouldn't want to bet the farm on it. Or even a bale of hay. It's a good first step, but there are a whole lot more.

**Don't rush the proposal.** Before you can write a good proposal for your book project, you have to know who the audience is (hint: it's never the "general educated reader" — there is no such creature) and how to reach it. You have to know your competition: Are there other books out there like the one you're writing? How will your book be different? Saying "there's nothing like this out there" will never fly. Publishers think in categories. Know where your book fits.

A book proposal has six main elements: an overview, an assessment of the book's competition, a sketch of its market, a description of you and your work, a table of contents, and a sample chapter. As you write your proposal, ask yourself: Why would anyone care about this topic? Make sure you have a good answer. "It's really interesting" is not a good answer. That may work to justify an article, but not something someone has to plop down a chunk of change to buy. The bottom line: It takes more than just a good idea.

Seek out criticism — and then listen to it. If a peer reviewer, an editor, a friend, or a copy editor tells you that some aspect of the book proposal or manuscript isn't working, you need to believe it. They may not be able to tell you how to fix the problem, but don't dismiss their advice. The best writers solicit criticism and then take what they can use.

**Email, don't call.** A few years ago I chatted with Elizabeth Knoll — then executive editor of Harvard University Press — about the best way for authors to approach publishers. "Please, please don't phone up editors out of the blue," she said. "And if you do, please don't leave a voicemail that asks them to call you back so that you can tell them

about your book. A two- or three-paragraph email inquiry gives you a much better chance to present yourself and your work, and gives much more information."

What should you do if an editor doesn't respond to your proposal in a reasonable amount of time? "If you don't hear anything within a month, ask — in a short, direct, polite email," Knoll said. "The longer you wait, the more annoyed you will feel, and the more mortified the editor will feel. Editors get overloaded, like everyone else, and that's the most probable reason for a nonresponse."

What if you still don't hear anything? "If you don't get a response to that email within a few days, or you get a response and then hear nothing for another month or two, you should probably write another short, direct, polite email saying that you

As you write your proposal, ask yourself: Why would anyone care about this topic? "It's really interesting" is not a good answer.

are moving along with other options,” Knoll said. “And you should do what you can, starting out, to have other options. It’s quite acceptable to submit your prospectus/inquiry to a few publishers at the same time, as long as you make it clear that that’s what you’re doing. But choose those few thoughtfully, based on books they have published in the last several years, in your field, in whose academic company you’d like your book to be.”

**Be nice to assistants.** Publishing is filled with smart young people at the lowest levels. The person answering the phone for your publisher today may be working on book acquisition next week. An assistant’s enthusiasm could be the thing that brings your manuscript to the top of the slush pile.

Once you have a book contract, you will be working with a team. The editor will kick the manuscript over to a copy editor, and then to someone in marketing. Be

nice to everyone at every step of the process. And for Pete’s sake, thank them in the acknowledgments. It takes a village to produce a book. Only a jerk fails to recognize that and offer due gratitude.

So make it easy for people to do their jobs. Most authors I worked with as an editor were professional and only sent in well-polished manuscripts. Others, however, could be difficult — not because they weren’t excellent

scholars, but because they figured their job as a writer was to do only the parts they were interested in.

There’s no better way to sour a publisher on your project than to submit a manuscript that’s a mess, that’s twice as long as the contractual length, or that features a sudden influx of previously unmentioned illustrations. Most presses will send instructions on how to prepare the text, and it’s up to you to make sure every word is spelled correctly, that illustrations are properly labeled, and that the manuscript is complete, final, and good. Pain-in-the-butt authors have a way of being karmically punished: An assistant you have alienated may not go out of the way to fix every little (or big) mistake you’ve made.

**The editing process.** One of things that writers love to complain about is not getting enough attention for their manuscript from their editor. What is reasonable to expect in terms of editing?

“The acquisitions editor will not line-edit your entire manuscript,” said Knoll, the former Harvard press editor. “There just isn’t time — especially not when every publisher is trying to publish more books on faster schedules than they were 10 years ago. But she will work with you on its organization, length, clarity, and focus. She will tell you when you’ve buried a great story that could introduce a chapter, or when you’ve strayed off your main topic into a swamp of side issues. She will understand enough of what you are trying to do to choose reviewers who can give both you and the publisher useful feedback, and help you figure out how to handle the feedback when you get it.”

**Use waiting time profitably.** When a book is ready to go into production, you have to wait for your editor to read it. Then it has to be copy-edited. You're always waiting for someone else to do their job. And that can be a great thing. I love getting a draft off my desk and onto someone else's. I need the enforced break to stop thinking about it, otherwise I keep deleting adverbs, doing the hokey pokey with commas, and driving myself insane wanting to rewrite the whole thing. Once it's sent off, I'm free to catch up on other stuff, and by the time it comes back to me, I can read the manuscript with fresh eyes.

Try to remember: Publishing a book takes a long time, and your project is one among many. Likewise, peer review can be a slow process, since your peers have their own courses to teach, committees to serve on, and books and articles to write. Everyone says yes with good intentions, and then life intervenes. If it takes too long, though, make sure you ask polite questions.

**If you want media attention, you may have to generate it yourself.** For most writers, the publication date comes and goes with neither a bang nor a whimper — just silence and a resulting postpartum depression. I've seen authors laid low by this. I've been one of them. What I've learned is to be well into my next project when the book I've been working on is finally published.

When a book comes out, people like to ask, "How's it doing?" Generally, writers have no idea. What are good sales figures? How many reviews are enough? Getting rich through writing happens rarely. If money comes, great. But don't count on it. Nor can you count on attracting groupies, having Oprah invite you to jump on her couch, or getting a rave review in *The New York Times*.

As writers, we each get to decide what makes our book feel like a success. Perhaps having a published book will earn you tenure or a promotion. Maybe you feel good about putting forth an important argument and entering a larger conversation. Some people are happy just to be done with the blasted thing. For me, getting "You, go girl!" emails from strangers is reward enough. Friends don't ask friends how the book is doing.

**Don't trash-talk your publisher.** One of the most important things I learned from my boss at Oxford was that presses don't publish books, they publish authors. If you want to keep writing and publishing, it's important to maintain a good relationship with the press that believed in you enough to put out your book. Please remember that publishing is filled with good, hard-working folks who never get enough credit. So try to give them the benefit of the doubt, and don't go around at conferences carping about your publisher. That's just ugly. If there's a problem, bring it up politely, and assume best intentions. And don't forget to say thank you.

*Adapted from an essay by Rachel Toor, a professor of creative writing at Eastern Washington University, in Spokane, and a former acquisitions editor at Oxford University Press and Duke University Press.*

# How to Pitch an Article

- ✓ Write a pitch that's the right length.
- ✓ Make the editor's job easier.
- ✓ Tailor your pitch to the publication.

**P**itching an article to a nonacademic publication involves a delicate balance. You must tell the editor what the article is about, show how the article would fit the publication, and explain why you are qualified to write said article before writing the whole darn thing. And you must accomplish all of that in a few paragraphs, which can seem daunting. Being able to craft a clear and concise pitch is a necessary skill that will help get you published. Based on my experience as an editor, here are six tips for success.

**Write more than a sentence.** Seem obvious? Then why do I get so many one-sentence pitches that read like this: “I want to write about [this particular thing].” One sentence is not a pitch because it doesn’t show me what you plan to write, or why you are the person who should write about it. Super-short pitches are often a sign that writers aren’t yet ready to approach an editor because they haven’t developed their ideas enough.

A one-sentence pitch — especially from a writer I don’t know — doesn’t give me confidence that you can write about the topic for the necessary word count. Additionally, short pitches are either too general or too vague, so I can’t figure out what the article will actually be about. The best pitches offer a glimpse of your voice as a writer as well as the tone of the article, so the editor can decide how you fit (or don’t) with the publication’s style, tone, and approach. Show an editor what you can do.

**Don’t write too much, either.** I’m most likely to accept

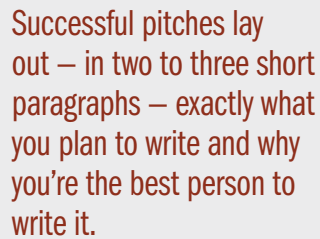
itches that lay out — in two to three short paragraphs — exactly what you plan to write and why you're the best person to write it. Please don't send an editor a pitch in which each paragraph is long (more than 250 words). Pay attention to the typical length of the publication's articles. If the essays in the publication are 800 to 1,000 words, don't make your pitch as long as the articles it publishes.

Instead, give editors a glimpse without sending a full draft (unless of course the publication welcomes complete submissions). Most of us want to help you shape your article to best fit our publication, and a full draft might not meet our standards for publication. Editors know our publications well. We have a good sense of what works best. Just give us enough of a pitch that we can craft an article together.

**Tell us who you are and what you've written.** Make sure to include a short bio with links to two or three of your clips (i.e., examples of your previously published work). Academics, when I say a short bio, I'm not joking: Your bio in the pitch should be two to three sentences — maximum. Don't send us your CV.

If you are pitching a particular editor for the first time, your bio is crucial because it explains who you are and why you are qualified to write the piece. Choose clips that best showcase your writing style and the topics you've written about before.

If you haven't been published anywhere before, that's OK. All writers have to start somewhere. If you don't have a link to a clip at another publication, send me a link to a particularly good blog post or a polished draft of something else you've written (not conference papers, which tend to be too long and too specific). Editors need to see what kind of writer you are, so take the time to show us.



Successful pitches lay out — in two to three short paragraphs — exactly what you plan to write and why you're the best person to write it.

**Explain why the article fits the publication.** That might seem self-explanatory, but the fact that I receive pitches that have nothing to do with the focus of my publication suggests I need to spell it out. Editors don't accept pitches unrelated to our publications. So make sure to explain why your potential article is a good fit for our particular outlet.

If you're not sure the article works for the publication, then it might not. Do your homework. Before you prepare a pitch, read articles at the publication's website or browse an issue or two, cover to cover. Pay attention to the tone of the articles. Notice what kind of language is used. For example, is it jargon-heavy or jargon-free? See which topics are covered by regular writers. Search the site to see if an article like yours has already been written. If it has, do you have a new angle? If so, say so in your pitch. Show that you've read the publication or, at the very least, that you've searched its website to see what it has already published.

**Always — always — read the submission guidelines.** Writers: Submission guidelines exist to tell you what the editor's expectations are for the publication. The

submission guidelines are there to help you prepare a pitch that both explains what you want to write and how your article fits within the parameters of the publication.

For instance, the submission guidelines for my publication, *Women in Higher Education*, clearly state that it is a monthly print newsletter — not a scholarly journal. And yet, I get a lot of pitches from academics trying to publish journal articles that are often five times over our standard length for guest submissions. I can't publish an article that takes up half the issue. More important, I don't want to, because that is not the type of article I publish or that my readers want to read.

Writers would know that if they read our submissions guidelines before they pitched. Please do your editor, and yourself, a favor and look at the guidelines ahead of time. You don't want your article to be rejected simply because it's too long or has the wrong tone. Make sure it fits the publication before you pitch — not after.

**Remember: A good pitch is a solid first impression.** Your goal is to capture the editor's attention. If I read your pitch and realize that I want to read your article, I make a note that you are a writer to remember. If I can't use that particular pitch, I would encourage you to email me again with something else that fits my publication better or that we haven't covered before.

Editors are always looking for good writers who pitch interesting, well-researched, provocative, and/or smart articles. An effective pitch shows you are a capable writer with intriguing ideas. So even if your pitch is rejected, an editor will remember you. And that could lead to you getting published.

*Adapted from an essay by Kelly J. Baker, a Ph.D. in religion and editor of the monthly newsletter Women in Higher Education.*



# How to Get a Book Contract

**W**hat counts as scholarship has expanded in recent years, yet in many fields, publishing a book is still the key to unlocking professional success. But first you need a press contract. Here are some guidelines for crafting a compelling book proposal.

**The cover letter.** Much like a cover letter for a job opening, the one you write in search of a book contract previews the content of the full submission. Your letter should include the key elements of your proposed book: the purpose, the audience, the content/format, and the projected length. It should end with a brief discussion of why this particular press is an ideal publisher for your book. In no more than a page and a half, you should be able to convince an editor that:

- Your topic fills an obvious gap in the field.
- The content will be innovative while still being in conversation with other texts.
- The intended audience will find the work useful.
- The book will be well aligned with the press's current and future publishing goals.

Don't make the mistake of writing your cover letter after you've finished the full proposal. Write the cover letter *first*. In fact, it's a good idea to write the cover letter before you write the full manuscript. In many ways, a cover letter

- ✓ How to tailor the cover letter.
- ✓ How to match your project with the right publishers.
- ✓ What publishers want to know.

serves as an outline. It's a good check to see if: (a) You can clearly communicate the purpose of your book, and (b) you've truly thought through its content and organization. If you don't have a coherent elevator pitch, it is unlikely that you will have a coherent book proposal (or manuscript).

**The publisher.** Self-publishing is not common practice in academe, so there are a lot of things to consider when choosing which presses to approach.

- **First, be careful of predatory presses.** Usually these are companies you've never heard of beyond their invitational emails, and they often charge "publication fees." The lure of quick publication times can be enticing, but such publishers are not acceptable for academic authors.
- **Trade or scholarly?** For those with tenure-track positions, find out if the standards for tenure and promotion on your campus require that you publish with a scholarly press or if a trade press is acceptable. Academic presses tend to have specialized audiences — other academics, graduate students, conference-goers — who often know a little something about your book's topic. Trade presses, on the other hand, have a more general audience. Trade books might be used in college classrooms or added to a professor's bookshelf, but the target audience is nonacademics. Scholarly and trade presses have far different requirements with respect to writing style (e.g., citations, paragraph length, use of quotations), so even if your institution doesn't dictate that you publish with one or the other, your topic and/or your writing style may be a better fit with a certain type of press.
- **Who else have they published?** If your institution doesn't have specific publication requirements, then start your search by looking at the books that influenced your project. Who published them? You want a press with a strong publication record in your subject area. If there are no such patterns to discern in your field, then start with the press that published the most notable book in your research area, or ask senior scholars for recommendations. Visit press websites, browse their collections, and compile editors' names and contact information. Gather a list of three to five presses, and save links to, or copies of, their formatting guidelines for future reference.
- **Haunt the conference book exhibits.** If a finished manuscript is a ways off, consider using scholarly conferences to browse the various presses and meet editors. Book exhibits at conferences aren't always as robust today as they used to be, but many companies still send representatives to major scholarly meetings, where they set up shop in an exhibit hall. This is an excellent opportunity to talk with someone whose actual job is to review book proposals. You can ask a lot more questions in person than via email. Between the books they've chosen to bring to the conference (which represent what they think is important in the field) and a brief conversation, it's fairly easy to determine if your book would be of interest to the editors. If you're lucky, the representative might browse your cover letter and give immediate feedback on the likelihood of the press's being interested.

One thing to keep in mind as you draft your book proposal: If a publisher's goal

is to make money (although very few editors will say that outright), then a book proposal needs to clearly articulate how the intellectual value of the work might translate into monetary value.

Somewhere in the proposal you may be asked to describe the book's logistics: length, images/figures, and permissions. Presses use that information to estimate the costs of publication. Of course, long books and ones with multiple images (especially if they are in color) are costlier to produce. Books with a lot of content that require permissions can make meeting a deadline difficult and might require you, as the author, to pay for reprint rights. (It's almost certain the publisher won't pay such costs, especially if you aren't an established author in the field.) Remember: You want a contract, so minimizing such concerns works only in your favor.

**Final considerations.** It can take anywhere from two weeks to a year for a press to fully review your proposal — and another year or two to actually publish the book once you've submitted the manuscript. Because presses are interested in cultivating both current and forthcoming subject areas, you should submit your proposal when you are certain that you can complete the manuscript within eight to 12 months (six months is preferable).

The press's desire to consider a full proposal versus sample chapters will also dictate your timeline. Think carefully before you write an entire manuscript if you have any doubts about its being able to attract a publisher. Still, you might want to write at least a third of the manuscript before you start seeking a publisher, just to ensure that you have enough content from which to choose when sending sample chapters to publishers.

Writing a book — particularly your first — requires careful planning, deep knowledge, and a strong commitment to the project. Comparatively, writing a book proposal is a piece of cake.

*Adapted from an essay by Manya Whitaker, an assistant professor of education at Colorado College.*

# The 6 Key Elements of a Book Proposal

- ✓ What to do *before* you write it.
- ✓ How to think about the potential market.
- ✓ How to persuade the publisher you're the right author.

The basic format for writing a book proposal couldn't be more straightforward. It's so standard you might be lulled into believing it's simply a matter of filling in the blanks. Yet the reality is: Once the easy-to-reject, crazy ones are shooed away, a publisher is left with a lot of attractive, viable-seeming candidates. You have to work to get the editor interested in yours.

A book proposal contains an invitation, a seduction, and an unromantic assessment of where you stand relative to others. It also must answer some basic questions that you won't get a second chance to clarify. So before you even think about approaching a publisher, you have to know:

- What's the topic?
- What's the argument, and why should anyone care about it?
- Why are you the person to write this book?
- Who will read (i.e., buy) it?
- And finally, why are you submitting a proposal to *this* publisher?

Once you can answer those questions, you are ready to start. A good proposal can run 30 to 40 pages, not including the sample chapter. And it's not a cut-and-paste job. Every proposal — and you can find plenty of examples online — should contain the following sections: overview, competition, market, author, table of contents, and sample chapter.

If you're having trouble getting started, try this method: Get a copy of a sample author's questionnaire. A publisher's marketing department will ask you to fill out one of those questionnaires just before your book is published. They're available on publishers' websites, and they're all pretty much the same. The questions start out easy — name, rank, contact information — and then get harder. Filling it out now will force you to think about the market for your book and guide you in writing an excellent and thorough book proposal.

**The overview.** For most academics, this is the hardest part of the book proposal to write. You're used to doing abstracts of your work, boiling down ideas to their essence, and getting your "elevator pitch" down, but that's not enough to get an editor on board.

Think about what got you interested in the topic. That shifts the focus of the overview from an information dump (on the editor) to the story of whatever fired you up in the first place. Often it's a tale of discovery, of being surprised, of struggling to figure out the answer to a question that kept them up at night. That's where an editor gets interested. Remember, the book proposal is an act of seduction. The overview is your chance to woo the editor. This is where you connect the prose with the passion, and yes, even for academic books — or maybe, especially for academic books — there has to be passion.

Remember, the book proposal is an act of seduction. The overview is your chance to woo the editor.

In the overview, relate your own intellectual history with your topic by posing a question someone would really want an answer to. The reader's response to your main argument can't be, "So what?"

Too many academics assume that their research will be fascinating to others. It very well could be, but only if you make it so. Often, the overview section of a proposal can form the basis for an excellent introduction to the book.

**The competition.** An author's questionnaire will ask you to list recent books on your topic, and then to explain how yours differs. Take that question seriously. The old "No one has ever done this before" isn't useful, just as your answer to the question about the potential audience can't be "The general educated reader." There is no such thing. You must figure out exactly who will feel a need to buy your book. That means giving detailed responses.

**The market.** Perhaps the hardest part of filling out the author's questionnaire is describing your own book. It will ask you for a cover-copy-length description (250 or so words), which, in engaging and accessible prose, should make clear the main points of the book and highlight the things that distinguish it from other books. Then you have to write a one- or two-sentence pitch — in even more engaging and accessible prose — that boils it down to about 50 words. Test it out on people who don't love you. See if they're interested.

Describing the potential market involves many different considerations:

- Most sample questionnaires ask how the book can be used in the classroom. Find out which universities — which professors, even — are offering courses that might adopt your book, even if it's not meant to be a textbook.
- In which academic departments might your book find a home? Ask yourself: If I want my book to be read across disciplines, is it written in a way that people from diverse fields will be able to appreciate? The answer is probably no, though you may not realize or want to admit it. So what can you do to change that as you work on the book? Think about the conferences where your book might be put on display.
- What are the organizations to which you belong? Do they have electronic mailing lists? Newsletters? Websites and blogs? Discussion forums? Are there awards or prizes the book should be submitted for? Are there special events or anniversaries that your book can be tied to? Do the groups that sponsor such prizes have annual meetings?
- Who should be approached for blurbs? Whose name, on the back cover of your book, would thrill you? Which of the publisher's authors might provide a good endorsement?
- Where should review copies be sent? If you've published previous books, where have they been reviewed? Of the journals in your field that accept advertising, which are the most effective in terms of reaching readers? Putting an expensive ad in *The New Yorker* or *The Atlantic* is not likely to be a good use of scarce marketing dollars. What targeted publications do your potential readers subscribe to? Have portions of the book been previously published? If so, where?

If you do all of that tedious work, and incorporate it into the market section of your book proposal, the editor is going to have a much easier time persuading her colleagues to send you a contract. And you're going to have to do all of that work eventually anyway.

**The author.** You need to convince the editor that you are the person to write this book. For the purposes of a proposal, this section should be more detailed than what you're used to seeing on the back flap of a book jacket. What are your credentials? Have you spent two months doing research on this topic — in archives all over the world — or 20 years? Does the book grow out of previously published work? Do you teach courses on the topic? Do you have some personal connection to it?

It has become increasingly important, even for scholarly books, that authors have what is called in the trade a "platform" — a way to reach a built-in audience for your book.

Do you write a column for the local newspaper? Do you have your own blog, or write for one? Do you tweet to 10 followers or to 10,000? Do you have an (up-to-date) website? Have you done any TV appearances? Lectured at various universities? What other books have you written? Have they won prizes or been reviewed in national media outlets? Where have you lived (that helps in promotion as bookstores like to host "locals")? Did you work in the industry you're writing about?

In other words, you need to convey what makes you the expert on this topic and what about you can be used to help promote the book.

**The table of contents.** A table of contents for the submission package is an outline of the book you plan to write, and to do that, you have to know what the book is. Of course the project may — and probably will — change and evolve during the writing process. You're not committing to anything here; you're just showing what you've got now.

Your preliminary table of contents should contain good chapter titles and a first sentence that provides the argument for each chapter. Yes, each chapter should have an argument, or at least its own mini-arc: What will you be looking at in this chapter, and how does that contribute to the book's overall narrative thread?

Keep doing research until you have juicy bits for each chapter. You need to convince the editor (and yourself) that there's enough material for a book and not just an article.

Once you start working on the table of contents, you will see how the argument can develop. You may decide to play around with the structure. Is the book really in three parts, but you've shoehorned it into two? Is there a chapter missing? What themes are coming through — threads you may not have realized when you were buried in your notes? This exercise can be very satisfying as you see the book taking shape.

**The sample chapter.** It doesn't have to be the first chapter; it has to be the best you've got. Figure out what's your most compelling stuff — the meat of the argument, the research that will surprise. Do not save the good parts for later. If you can't get an editor interested now, there will be no later. Which chapter will leave the reader wanting more? Which will allow the editor to learn something and let her see the promise of the rest of the book? Which will show off your narrative skills, or your ability to make an argument using graphics? That's the one to submit.

In the classroom your students have to at least pretend to listen to you. But busy editors and agents find it easy to put down projects that don't compel them. The effort and thinking required to write a good book proposal — and make no mistake, it is a lot of work — will pay off, not only in netting you a contract, but by helping you write with a reader in mind.

*Adapted from an essay by Rachel Toor, a professor of creative writing at Eastern Washington University, in Spokane, and a former acquisitions editor at Oxford University Press and Duke University Press.*

# How to Get a Useful Critique Before Submission

- ✓ What kind of feedback do you need?
- ✓ What stage are you at in the writing?
- ✓ Who can you approach for an assessment?

Academic writers often feel isolated. Yet for a variety of reasons, many of them resist asking for feedback on their projects. Some don't yet have an established network of colleagues to tap. Others fear being scooped or having their ideas stolen. Many simply hesitate to bother busy colleagues with a request for a critique. But the biggest barrier may be fear of receiving harsh, or just unconstructive, criticism.

Trouble is, if you wait until the peer-review stage to get feedback on a draft, you may miss out on suggestions that could improve your odds of being published. So how should you go about getting truly constructive criticism? Just as there is a craft to writing, there is also a craft to getting useful suggestions for revision. Start by reflecting on what you really want to know about specific aspects of a piece you are developing.

## What kind of feedback do you need?

Have you ever asked a friend to read a draft that you were really excited about, only to receive corrections on your grammar? Here's the problem: Academics are trained to be critical thinkers, but few are trained to be curious. And very few are trained explicitly in the craft of revision and developmental editing.

Academics often rely on the old "sandwich method" to offer a critique: Open by writing something positive, if vague, about the manuscript; then fill the sandwich with a thick critique burger, and top it off with a thin slice of ge-



neric encouragement. And, really, what else can they do? Even the best-intentioned peer readers don't know what you want most from the critique — unless you tell them. It's often a relief for readers to be asked to consider a specific question about your writing. It narrows their task.

In short, the first step to getting helpful feedback is to define your reader's job. For example, are you wondering how you might expand the discussion section of your draft? Are you uncertain whether its current organization logically supports your thesis? Are you thinking you need more context to set up your argument? Do you suspect a certain point needs further explication?

## What stage of the writing process are you in?

Next, give your readers a sense of where you are in the writing process. If you're at an early stage, for example, you may want to ask for suggestions of additional literature to ground your argument. Providing context about your process also opens the door to communicating what kinds of feedback you *don't* want. If you're still developing your argument, refining your prose is not likely your top priority. Letting your readers know what you are not interested in at this moment lets them off the hook in a way. It simplifies their task. More important, it saves them time, which allows them to better focus on the issues you *are* most concerned about.

If you have a lot of concerns about your manuscript, no single reader is likely to be able to address them all. Plus, that kind of full-scale engagement could overburden one reader.

The second step to getting helpful feedback is matching your questions about your writing to the strengths of several peer readers. It makes sense to develop a small network of readers to call on at different stages in your writing process.

## Who are potentially helpful readers?

Think of your friends from graduate school and colleagues at your own institution. Whose writing do you admire and why? Who has published in the journals where you would like to place your own articles? Who has relationships with a university press that may be a good fit for your own book?

Cast a broad net. Colleagues within your own discipline may have a good grasp of your field's expectations and conventions, but they are likely to bring their own scholarly agendas to reading your work. So think also of people you've made connections with who work in different, but somewhat related, disciplines. For example, if you're a literary critic, getting feedback from a historian, a theologian, or an anthropologist could help you see your work through a wider lens and understand how to better convey what's really significant about it.

Consider also people you would like to get to know better — and whose drafts

It's often a relief for readers to be asked to consider a specific question about your writing. It narrows their task.

you might enjoy reading because, of course, you have to be willing to return the favor. This relationship is reciprocal, but it won't be too burdensome if you set boundaries around your requests for feedback. Reciprocity can also build trust and a sense of solidarity in the struggle to write.

Your peers face the same kinds of deadlines and dilemmas as you do. Developing a small group of people to tap for feedback on writing questions can provide you with a much more concrete sense of how actual readers will respond to your work. That knowledge may enable you to deal with potential problems before you submit the manuscript to a publisher.

*Adapted from an essay by Amy Benson Brown, a writing coach who works with faculty writers through Academic Coaching & Writing.*

# When You're Told to Revise and Resubmit

**M**any scholars see peer reviewers as “the enemy.” A Google search of “revise and resubmit” reveals a palpable frustration with peer review — especially in relationship to negative reader comments.

Negative feedback on your writing will always sting. It's hard to read those comments even once, let alone to revisit them throughout the already arduous revision process. And it's absolutely normal to have a bad response to a bad review.

But — BUT — that critical feedback is also absolutely necessary to the crafting of a better article, chapter, or book. Really. And think of it this way: Being asked to revise and resubmit is actually a big victory. It indicates that your article or book manuscript has enough merit to warrant a request for major revisions. If it didn't, it would have been rejected outright. Your ultimate goal as a writer is to start receiving more acceptances “with minor revisions.”

If you can learn to take not-so-positive comments in stride — remembering that they're not about you, they're about your work— you can use a negative review to your positive advantage, rather than letting it derail you. So don't take criticism of your work personally even if, or especially if, it is written in a condescending or confrontational tone.

Instead:

- After reading through a reviewer's comments for the first time, do nothing. Or, rather, vent to yourself. Call a sympathetic friend and complain. Eat some potato chips. Watch some bad TV. Allow yourself the free-

- ✓ 4 ways to cope with criticism.
- ✓ How to decipher reviewers' comments.
- ✓ 6 techniques for easier and faster revisions.

dom to wallow for a moment.

- Whatever you do, do not respond to your editor or your reviewers immediately. Do not craft a snarky email and press send. (Don't laugh. That happens enough that Sage — one of the biggest academic publishers — gives this explicit advice on its website.)
- Read your comments again and again. Make notes. Repeat the mantra: This is not about me. This is not about me. This is not about me.
- Get back to work — you've got an article or book to revise.

## Translating the Review

Now you've got to decipher your reviewer's comments, many of which can seem vague. Here are some typical reviewer responses and their relationship to common problems in academic writing. Think of this list as a translation tool, helping you to move from reviewer lingo back into practical advice on revisions.

**The Lit Review Comment.** “Place this in the literature” or “does not do a good job of synthesizing the literature” or “this article doesn't situate itself within the field” are all ways in which a reviewer might raise questions about the breadth or depth of your literature review.

It can be tough to adequately review the literature in your field(s) in a small space. This sort of a comment from a reviewer means: You need to revisit your bibliography and scan for the obvious missing names. You need to review your literature review.

Try grouping your bibliography under fields or subjects. If you can't do that, then you need to think about why not. What texts are you missing? If you don't really know, then ask people you trust who have been doing this a lot longer than you. They'll not only know exactly who or what you're missing but they'll probably be able to assess your problem in under 10 minutes.

**The Lopsided Article Comment.** When a reviewer writes, “author doesn't provide enough empirical evidence to support his point” or “needs more integration of theory with data” or “has too many (or few) examples,” such comments suggest that the piece has an imbalance of evidence/data and argument/analysis.

Put those comments back into the context of your own manuscript. Reread your article and flag evidence and theory with different colors. Then look at the result. You'll be able to “see” what your reviewer saw in the prose. Most likely, this will be a sea of one color (or the other), or it may appear as segregated blocks. Neither of those is the right “mix.” This is a huge signal that you haven't, in fact, used enough evidence, or that you went overboard with it, or that you truly haven't “integrated” data and analysis in your writing.

Caution: Don't just slap on more evidence or theory in separate sections. The key is an even interweaving of theory *with* evidence. Think of your text as a *pas de deux*; the analysis and your data should be working together, not separately, to support your argument. (See further on for concrete advice on fixing this particular problem.)

**The Reinvention of the Wheel Comment.** Any of the following comments might mean that your article is currently in monologue form instead of part of an ongoing dialogue:

“You should cite/incorporate the work of X.”

“Please discuss this additional series of primary texts.”

“Others have already said this, author should cite.”

“Author should show how this is different from X’s use of Y term.”

Such comments indicate that, either by ignorance or purposeful omission, you haven’t adequately engaged other authors working on similar topics or issues. Instead of taking it personally and reacting poorly, learn to see such comments as an opportunity to widen the reach of your argument and engage with different literatures.

This is hard for everyone. Who can know everything, read everything? No one. This is why such comments, while aggravating, are absolutely necessary to one’s growth as a scholar.

**The Weak Argument Comment.** When reviewers write “argument is unclear” or “essay should perhaps have been focused on X” or “this is really about Y,” that indicates the reader has not understood the author’s main thesis.

This vague-sounding comment is the type that often initially makes an author’s blood boil. It simply means that a reader hasn’t understood your main point. Either you don’t have one (perhaps you actually have three arguments, not one), or you haven’t stated it as clearly as you think you have.

As Don Chance, a chaired professor of finance at Louisiana State University, powerfully puts it: “Remind yourself that even a horrible, critical review tells one thing about your writing: You lost someone. The points you meant to convey did not come across and permitted this person to misinterpret your paper and take delight in shooting you down from the veil of anonymity.”

If a reader disagrees with you, that’s one thing. But if they can’t make out your argument or you haven’t really supported it? That’s a good sign that you need to go back to the drawing board.

## Techniques for Easier and Faster Revisions

Going back and reworking your project is never easy, but it is absolutely necessary. Here are six techniques to help you through the process.

**Organize Your Revisions.** After you’ve read through the comments once or twice, go back through and highlight all the major points and suggestions. Now it’s time to map out your plan of attack: You have to figure out what you need to change and how to do it. Here are two strategies for approaching that task:

1. **The Chart:** Open an Excel file or Word document and list each suggested revision. In a separate column, list the page numbers or sections related to that revision. Then fill in a column for the changes you’ll make. Make sure to leave a blank column where you can “check” that you’ve completed each discrete

task. Having a chart can help you to organize your revisions and keep track of your progress.

2. **The Letter:** Alternatively, you can spend time crafting a detailed response to the reviewers **before** tackling the revisions themselves.

Open a Word document and begin crafting a letter responding to each of the major revisions that reviewers want to see. Explain how you plan to fix the main issues. This process forces you to think through the similarities and differences in reviewer comments and decide how best to alter your article. It also allows you to take control of the revision process by deciding — before you even begin — what you will and won't revise.

The letter should never be longer than two or three single-spaced pages, which means that you can't always respond to every point the reviewers make. Writing your response to a critique allows you to formulate for yourself how and why you'll revise your text to strengthen your arguments. The letter forms the basic "outline" for your revisions. It helps organize the tasks ahead and assign them an importance ranking, so you don't waste too much time on the small stuff or on figuring out how or where to get started.

**Draft a Reverse Outline.** Before you do anything else, print out your article and reverse outline it. By this point, you've already created your chart or written your letter. You know the discrete things you need to change and are ready to flag problem spots. Use color-coded flags for separate tasks. Cross out any weak paragraphs, marking them for deletion or major overhaul. Be ruthless. Especially if you're being asked to add material to your manuscript, cut mercilessly anything that's not directly related to your main argument. You'll need that space back to stay under your word limit.

**Tackle the Big Stuff First.** Most writers have a tendency to futz too long with the small stuff. Making minor changes can make you feel like you've made "progress," but really you're just delaying the pain of overhauling your article. So if you need to make major structural changes — such as moving, deleting, or adding in huge chunks of text — do that first. You wouldn't repaint a hallway before you've ripped up the wall to fix the electrical wiring, so you shouldn't be perfecting sentences before you integrate data and theory or add in more evidence.

Make yourself do the hardest things first, and the revision process will actually take much less time. I promise. You'd be surprised how much valuable writing time is wasted by, say, fixing the bibliography first.

**How to Better Integrate Evidence With Analysis or Theory.** This is one of the most common suggestions for revision. To begin fixing this problem, flag paragraphs that are evidence and those that are analysis. Look at the balance. Then consider where you need to insert either more evidence or analysis to balance out the paragraph.

If you have too much theory, go back to your data and mine it for more detail that supports your argument. Make sure you're not using an excessive amount of theory to mask the fact that you're still not sure what your own argument really is (this happens). To get rid of excess theory, follow the age-old writing rule: Show, don't tell. An example or two will help to ground your theory.

If you have too much evidence, on the other hand, see where you can pause your narrative and dig deeper. For this problem, the general advice is flipped: Don't just show us, tell us something about what we're seeing. Explain why you're using this data.

If you're really stuck, start with a few key pieces of evidence and a few concepts or a theoretical framing. In a new document, try interweaving them together. Getting the right balance is tricky, but will come more naturally once you've forced yourself to pay attention to what each paragraph and sentence is doing.

Often an imbalance of evidence/data and theory/analysis is indicative that your overall thesis isn't strong enough. You may have an "aha" moment when trying to fix this problem. Don't be afraid to entirely reorganize your article as a result. It will be much stronger and your work will proceed much more easily if you don't stubbornly stick to an original thesis that isn't working.

**How to Proceed When Reviewers Disagree.** If you're faced with multiple reviewers who have diametrically opposed suggestions for revisions, you must adjudicate the issue for yourself. When you're charting your revisions or crafting your response, you need to decide — as objectively as possible — which reviewer is making the stronger case and why. You may need to reverse outline before it becomes fully clear which way to proceed. Keep in mind that, as an author, you do not need to make all of the suggested changes. You do, however, need to have a rationale for why you won't make those changes.

Believe it or not, contradictory suggestions are a blessing in disguise. They allow us to see the weak spots in our article's structure or argumentation. The best part is that we're free to decide how best to fix things — without being tied to any particular reviewer's point of view. Usually, you'll have a gut instinct about which reviewer is "right." Go with that feeling and don't overthink it. We almost always know when someone has accurately pinpointed a weakness in our own writing because the critique feels "truer" than other feedback we receive.

**Make This Process Fun.** "Revise-and-resubmits are great." Repeat that mantra often. Reward yourself for making progress on the hardest parts of your revisions. Try to have fun with this. Create space to rework your ideas and be creative throughout the process. (For instance, I use crayons to mark up my text. Really. You can't take anything you do with crayons too seriously.)

Revisions are grueling, but they can also be very rewarding. To paraphrase Dorothy Parker: you may hate revising, but you'll love having revised — and seeing your books and articles in print.

Use a negative review  
to your positive advantage,  
rather than letting it  
derail you.

*Adapted from a series of essays by Theresa MacPhail, an assistant professor in the science and technology studies program at Stevens Institute of Technology.*

# When to Negotiate With Your Editor

Standing between your article and external peer review is a journal's editor in chief. Journal editors, at a minimum, must decide whether to send your article out for review or whether, instead, to “desk reject” it, usually accompanied by a brief note suggesting that this article simply isn't for them. Some editors — they can become legendary in their fields — will request substantial revisions from an author before agreeing to send the article out for review. (This can be frustrating, but it can also be wonderful — and it can substantially improve an article's chances of eventual acceptance.) Others are much more hands-off, issuing desk-rejections with barely a word of explanation.

Although graduate students and early-career scholars tend not to know this, it is sometimes possible to *negotiate with an editor* when a piece has been rejected. In cases in which a rejection follows on two diametrically opposed judgments — when one reviewer praises your article to the skies but the other is unimpressed — it is worth asking whether the editor might consider sending the article to a third reviewer.

In cases where, in your judgment, a reviewer evinces ignorance of the topic under review sufficient to compromise his or her authority as an adjudicator, it might be worth making your case and asking the editor to consider using a different reviewer.

And in cases where a rejection follows on a lukewarm but substantive and engaged review, it might be worth suggesting that you are willing to overhaul your essay in line with the reviewer's complaints, and that you'd welcome the opportunity to have the reviewer look at the revision should he or she be amenable.

Finally, in cases in which a revise-and-resubmit follows on two contradictory or mutually incompatible revision suggestions, it can be worth asking an editor which to make a priority. The editor might have strong opinions on the subject, and the ultimate decision lies there, not with the reviewers.

Negotiating with an editor should be done sparingly and, above all, graciously, especially if your article has been rejected. Negotiations are worth bothering with only if comments from the editor or a reviewer suggest an at least partially positive disposition to your article, or if you are truly convinced (and can make a convincing case) that a reviewer has misunderstood your article because of a lack of knowledge, rather than through your inadequate presentation. Indicate that you are grateful for all feedback and that you understand that your article might not be right for the journal in question.

Don't betray hostility or impatience; frame your requests as polite suggestions. And accept that the odds are against you. But believe it or not, sometimes negotiations work.

*By Len Gutkin, a Ph.D. in English who is an associate editor at The Chronicle.*



# The 5 Species of Peer Reviewers

**T**he peer-review process is always the subject of some scorn among scholars. It helps to greet its idiosyncrasies with resignation, which serves as a kind of inoculation against the hope of a reasonable review.

Try to anticipate the peer-review process as an adventure in which some type of unfairness will emanate and afford you an opportunity to figure out how to adjust to it. My own approach: I now expect one of five reviewers to emerge in most articles I send out for review, and the truth is that I am rarely disappointed.

**The expert in everything.** So many comments from reviewers have nothing to do with their area of expertise. On one of my papers, for example, a reviewer provided punctuation directives: “The rule of thumb is that no more than one colon or semicolon can be used on every other page.”

My reviewer was a management scholar, and why she would comment on (and require me to change) something that is the purview of a copy editor and not in her area of expertise eludes me. I’ve looked around, spoken to experts, and not found the existence of such a rule. Maybe I am just not looking hard enough. But I had to change my punctuation to pacify a reviewer whose ego appeared to outdistance her expertise.

**The insecure expert.** Ego, it appears, rears its ugly head into other aspects of the review. In discussing reviewer horror stories with colleagues, one damaged ego story is recurrent: the expert who has to prove to you that you are ill-in-

- ✓ Varieties of expert advice.
- ✓ How to respond.

formed and he is going to educate you. Those reviews tend to start with: “The author has missed a significant number of critical articles in the paper,” and proceed with sometimes more than a dozen citations you failed to consider.

Occasionally, there is something relevant in the list of citations. More often, upon inspection, the content of those missed citations tends to reveal two different things:

- Most relate to an idea you touched on only briefly in your paper. The only thing you may be guilty of here is not remembering that single sentence that marginally related to the least-relevant concepts in your paper.
- Second, buried in the long list of relevant citations are a few of the reviewer’s own papers, which you failed to cite because you didn’t know he was going to review your paper. But your failure provides a crushing blow to the self-esteem of an already fragile ego, frustrated that his work has not yet gotten the accolades and awards it deserves.

So you dutifully include the citations. Readers of the published paper will no doubt be confused why you included the citations, since even you are unable to muster a logical explanation to the editor.

**The expert who should have written your paper.** Many a scholar has come to a painful realization upon reading a reviewer’s comments: This reviewer thinks she should have written the paper herself. There is always a reviewer who is certain that she can reconceptualize your theory more comprehensively, reframe your hypotheses more succinctly, and suggest methods that are more current and better utilized.

And every once in a while, there’s the reviewer who tells you she really likes the idea, loved reading it, and then goes on for paragraphs about how you need to do an entirely different study or reformulate the complete theory because the execution is “fraught with difficulties.”

So many times I’ve said to myself, on reading such reviews, “God should have granted the idea to this smart chap who would have done a better job of it.” Well, that’s not really what I say, but I know that’s what the reviewer would want to hear, so I self-deprecate my work in my revision, grovel to the reviewer’s supposed intellectual superiority — and try to do it her way. Like the customer, I’ve learned that the reviewer is always right.

**The expert who reveals his ignorance.** Blind reviews may be a decent way to review, but they also lend themselves to reviewers inadvertently revealing their own incompetence. I know I’m not the only author to be told by a reviewer that an earlier study I conducted myself and then cited in my new manuscript was “portrayed incorrectly” or “reported data in a way the authors did not intend.” Ah, yes, age is getting to many of us, and we may be forgetful about the major findings and theoretical development of our own work.

To add insult to injury, you must then explain your article to the reviewer, articulating something you already wrote once and he didn’t understand — all the while keeping your authorship of the earlier work unstated — without sounding like you’re saying “Did you actually read my article?”

Each time that happens, you treat it like a spiritual experience. You try to tell

yourself that repetition of what you already know is a way to learn patience, so the reviewer must be right to do this.

**The nasty reviewer.** This type of reviewer engages in character assassination, ad hominem attacks, and a full, unequivocal repudiation of everything from your title to your references.

This is the “super-reviewer” — the one who appears to have had all empathy eradicated and critiques your paper with the surgical precision of a nuclear weapon. “The author’s perspective is simple-minded, superfluous, and strategically inadequate,” said one reviewer of a friend’s paper, “and left me asking why I spent my time reviewing it.”

Yet it is the nasty reviewer that many of us like the most because the vitriol is usually accompanied by an outright rejection, which means that you will not have to respond to the comments. You will not have to degrade yourself by agreeing with this reviewer and “fixing” it.

I suppose I am grateful I have managed to get more than 100 articles through the review process. I take comfort in knowing that, at least in reviewing articles for journals that only other academics will read, there is relatively little damage done to the larger universe of ideas. Most of the world’s ideas will be spared the constraints of too few semicolons and the transmogrification of good ideas into muddy ones. I just try not to think about how those reviewers must be treating their students.

*Adapted from an essay by Robert A. Giacalone, a professor of business ethics at John Carroll University.*

In discussing reviewer horror stories with colleagues, one damaged ego story is recurrent: the expert who has to prove to you that you are ill-informed and he is going to educate you.

## What Is Your Process for Revision?

The advantage of word processing is that revision is easy. The disadvantage is the temptation to preserve one's golden prose, even when it's actually a brick. Waiting long enough so that you see your prose as foreign helps. My books have got longer since word processing. Another trick is to read your own draft immediately after reading someone else's excellent writing. ... It is good to read your own work with good prose ringing in your ears. After all, there's enough bad prose ringing, too. Get the right ring.

— *Deirdre McCloskey, a professor of economics at the University of Iowa.*

I revise at every stage of the process and at every level. Sentences get endlessly rewritten, as do chapters, as does the whole book. I go easier on myself at the beginning of a project, when I'm finding my way in. I don't agonize as much about getting every sentence right because I know that by the end of the book I'll have discovered so much more about what the book is really about. Often this leads to a complete refashioning of the first chapter. And I'm ruthless about extirpating sentences that I deem no longer needed, even if the production of them had cost me hours. In fact, sometimes it's my husband who argues with me to put certain sentences back in.

— *Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, a visiting professor at New York University, a philosopher, and a novelist.*

Because I assume everything will have to be revised many times, I am relatively cavalier about first drafts. I know I can write freely on the first draft, and call in the Quality Control Department for inspection a few days later. At the same time, I believe I should not waste my own time as an editor; I try to leave myself working drafts that are in good shape. And I never submit something for publication unless I have already revised it two or three times. ... I still have the standard anxiety of a struggling musician: Regardless of the gig, I want to be invited back.

— *Michael Bérubé, a professor of literature and director of the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Pennsylvania State University.*

My later tweaking is always done on printed-out text. But my sole revisions are stylistic. My preparation for writing is so slow and extensive that I never revise *per se*, as others might understand it. For example, perhaps only twice in my entire career have I changed the position of a paragraph. The consecutive logic of my block-like paragraphs (as in Roman road-building) is always resolved at the outline stage, before I ever sit down to write. Revision for me is essentially condensation. ... By subtracting words, I force compression and speed on the text. ... In addition to condensation, I also employ syncopation, modeled on the jazz-inflected Beat poetry that had a huge impact on me in college. When people try to parody my prose, this is what they miss — those subtle, jagged twists, turns, and tugs, whose ultimate source is music. In short, the secret of my writing is focus, planning, persistence, labor, and attention to detail.

— *Camille Paglia, a professor at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia.*

# How to Set Up Your Own Book Tour

In 2017, we completed a 12-week, 38-stop tour of the continental United States, discussing our new book, *Listen, We Need to Talk: How to Change Attitudes About LGBT Rights*. A book tour like that is unusual for academics, and afterward, we fielded a lot of questions about how we made it happen and the role played by our publisher.

While our publisher was supportive, we arranged this on our own. And it was fabulous. Here's how we did it.

**Start with email.** A year ago, with a publication date in sight, we sent out more than 100 emails to everyone we knew — a geeky version of cold-calling for prospects. We kept the messages short and direct, with wording along these lines: *Brian Harrison and I have a fabulous book coming out in December on persuasion experiments and same-sex marriage. We're hoping to publicize the book by getting our friends (that's you!) to invite us out for talks. Does [institution] have any sort of speaker series or workshops that this might be a good fit for? No worries if you can't help, of course, but I figure it can't hurt to ask, and I don't have an agent. :)*

Most folks wrote back. We soon realized that, while some colleagues wanted to bring our book talk to their campus, they just didn't have the financial means to host us. That's when we turned into matchmakers: Once we had a funded trip on the calendar at one campus, we would reach out to other nearby institutions to see if they would be interested in a cost-shared trip.

In many cases, that was just what people needed to hear in order to make it happen.

- ✓ Email every academic you know who might be interested.
- ✓ Offer more than a book talk.
- ✓ Combine your work trips with book-talk stops.

For example, people at the University of North Texas had money to invite one of us (Melissa) to the Dallas/Fort Worth area, but folks at nearby Texas Christian University had fewer resources. So we scheduled talks back-to-back and a North Texas faculty member did the driving from one campus to the other. We also heard from the University of Houston and Rice University. Scheduling all four talks in Texas over three consecutive days meant fewer days away from home and fewer expenses for all of the campuses.

We adopted the same cost-sharing principle elsewhere, including a 10-day tour of the Northeast, with stops at places like Syracuse, Skidmore, Dartmouth, Amherst, Lehigh, Princeton, Yale, and the University of Maryland. Some institutions paid for our hotel, some provided meals, and others paid for our car mileage. Delivering nine talks in 12 days was challenging, but it was also efficient and saved our hosts money.

**Offer more than a book talk.** Another aspect of our book-tour planning was communicating what we could do in addition to a book talk. We guest-lectured on all sorts of topics. We met with groups of undergraduate honors students, with LGBTQ center staff, and with graduate students. We gave workshops on how to conduct field experiments and how to establish partnerships with community organizations. At some campuses, we faced a jam-packed schedule from breakfast through dinner. Other campuses just wanted a book talk, and we were grateful for a little quiet time.

**Combine work obligations and book-tour stops.** A final piece of the puzzle was coordinating our book-tour stops with our other travel obligations. Melissa took advantage of a work trip to Seattle to arrange a talk at a local bookstore. Brian spoke at independent bookstores in Minneapolis and Iowa City during visits to campuses nearby. Conferences in Chicago and Pittsburgh were similarly used as no-cost opportunities to schedule book talks.

Of course, there were a few hiccups. Because the schedule was so tight, we often spent quite a few hours on the road, cursing traffic or watching nervously for approaching tornadoes (we're looking at you, Indiana!). One talk had to be rescheduled for October because of a missed flight connection.

The end results, we found, were worth dealing with those hiccups. For any academic authors interested in following our lead, here are some tips to consider in setting up your own book tour:

- **Free up your schedule.** None of this would have worked had we not been able to clear our schedules for 12 weeks — taking a break from teaching for a semester and leaning more heavily than usual on our husbands to manage our households and parenting. Even if you can't get a semester off, talk to your families, departments, and institutions to see if you can free up any amount of time to take your book on tour.
- **Reach out to friends and colleagues.** Let them know you're interested. You've got to toot your own horn a bit and put yourself out there — a prospect that will make some academics uncomfortable. Push past it. Don't be overly modest about your work or expect folks to come calling. Keep in mind that people often just don't know you have a book to talk about, or that you're inter-

ested in giving a talk at their campus. Get on their radar.

- **Go local.** Send messages to small bookstores that specialize in your kind of work, or where you have a hometown connection.
- **Go beyond local.** Reach out beyond your own discipline and look for opportunities with student organizations on campus, as we did with LGBT centers.
- **Rejection hurts, but try not to take it personally.** Some people you approach won't be interested. Maybe your book isn't a good fit for their workshop or their calendar is full. If they don't answer your email right away, try following up once or twice. And if they still don't respond, move on.
- **Don't expect too much help from your publisher.** Although our publisher was supportive — providing books for post-talk signings and sending some posters and handouts to accessorize our podiums — we really did this on our own. Organizing a book tour is beyond the job description of your publisher's marketing department. Many financially strapped scholarly presses will not have the staff or money to set up a book tour for you.

It's rare for academics to get a lot of direct response to our research, which is one reason why our book tour was so satisfying. One campus blew our socks off with a turnout of some 400 people. Folks at another braved a terrible thunderstorm to hear our talk. One professor not only had us teach her class but even assigned our book. It was an amazing feeling to walk into a class and see the students pull out their dog-eared and highlighted copies. At yet another institution, a faculty member whose 11-year-old transgender son had been reading our book proclaimed it "the most important book ever."

Some of our best memories are from conversations we had with young people in the audiences. We offered scholarly and publishing advice to students and faculty members about their research, and life advice to young LGBTQ folks about how to come out to their parents or find a tenure-track job as a member of the LGBTQ community.

Yes, it was exhausting. Yes, our husbands and children missed us. But it was one of the best things we've ever done. We sold out the first run of books and hit No. 1 on the Amazon best-seller list for books in our subfield. We got folks talking about and reading our work. And we're looking forward to doing it again when we have another book to share.

*Adapted from an essay by Brian F. Harrison, a lecturer in political science at Northwestern University, and Melissa R. Michelson, a professor of political science at Menlo College.*

# Marketing Your Book

## An interview with Niko Pfund

- ✓ Establish a Twitter following well before the book is out.
- ✓ Post about your book on the publisher's blog or Tumblr page.
- ✓ Interview on the publisher's YouTube channel.

Few publishers have the resources to send authors on book tours anymore. Instead, scholarly publishers have increasingly shifted to content marketing online, with writers playing a central role in promoting their own books.

That approach, said Niko Pfund, president and academic publisher at Oxford University Press, “compels a publisher to be more clever about its promotions and therefore more familiar with the work we’re promoting than ever before. Just as editors tell their authors to ‘show’ not ‘tell,’ marketers are now moving beyond the idea that presses can simply point at a book and say, ‘Trust us, this is great.’ They need to be able to interest readers with the content of the book.”

It’s not always easy, he points out: “Developing this sort of expertise takes resources, investment, and effort, and the sophistication to tailor your promotions to the intended audience.”

The key point is a simple one. “Readers love to hear from, and connect with, authors.” And the way to do that now is through social media.

“We can provide authors with all kinds of tools to help get the word out, whether that be via a flier or by helping them write an email to send to people they know through their alumni associations, etc. Properly enlisted, social media is a great tool for spreading the word. It can help the message of a book get out to appropriate networks without



feeling like spam or a sales pitch — because it's not, or needn't be."

Pfund gave some specific examples of content-marketing strategies that Oxford has used, and the key role played by writers. Among other approaches, the press has:

- Encouraged writers to join Twitter well before publication. They can build up a following that, once the book is out, can drive readers to it.
- Published timely posts on the publisher's blog and Twitter account about a new scholarly book, to promote debate and attract readers.
- Asked academics to write for the press's blog as a way to "showcase new publications and research."
- Featured author-written articles on Oxford's Tumblr page, which can be widely shared.
- Interviewed authors on Oxford's YouTube channel. The videos not only promote the book but also may be used in the college classroom as an educational tool.


As a writer, you may feel like it's hard enough to write the dang book and that having to promote it, too, is not only tiresome but unseemly. The whole process calls to mind a quote from British novelist Ian McEwan: "The best bit of writing a novel is writing the novel. Then six or nine months later you're required to schlep around like some guy selling brushes and you become the employee of your former self, who was so happy at his desk, freely dreaming. He's sending you as his salesman."

For many authors, a review in *The New York Times Book Review* is still the mark of acceptance by the Eastern literary establishment. But there are now fewer print book reviews than there are ivory-billed woodpeckers. There are, however, more blogs than there are pigeons in St. Mark's Square, and savvy authors who want their work to be read will see ways to take advantage of them.

Publishers often use a word that academics tend to find fairly icky, "branding." You may not like to think of yourself as a brand, but publisher's imprints (such as Penguin Classics) have often served exactly that purpose. Writers know to expect a certain level of quality or taste, or even a particular political slant, from certain presses.

Today you ignore brand building and platform construction at your own risk, even if it feels slightly creepy.

"In the early days of social media," Pfund said, "there was much reluctance on the part of authors to devote time and effort to this sort of work. And everyone was inexperienced as to how to go about it. But changing demographics and, most importantly, quantifiable successes are changing minds. A recent analogy might be to



Today you ignore brand building and platform construction at your own risk, even if it feels slightly creepy.

the early days of online retailing when authors were anxious that their books were being ‘put online for free.’ Today we understand the benefits of discoverability, and authors are justifiably concerned if prospective readers can’t leaf around in their book online.”

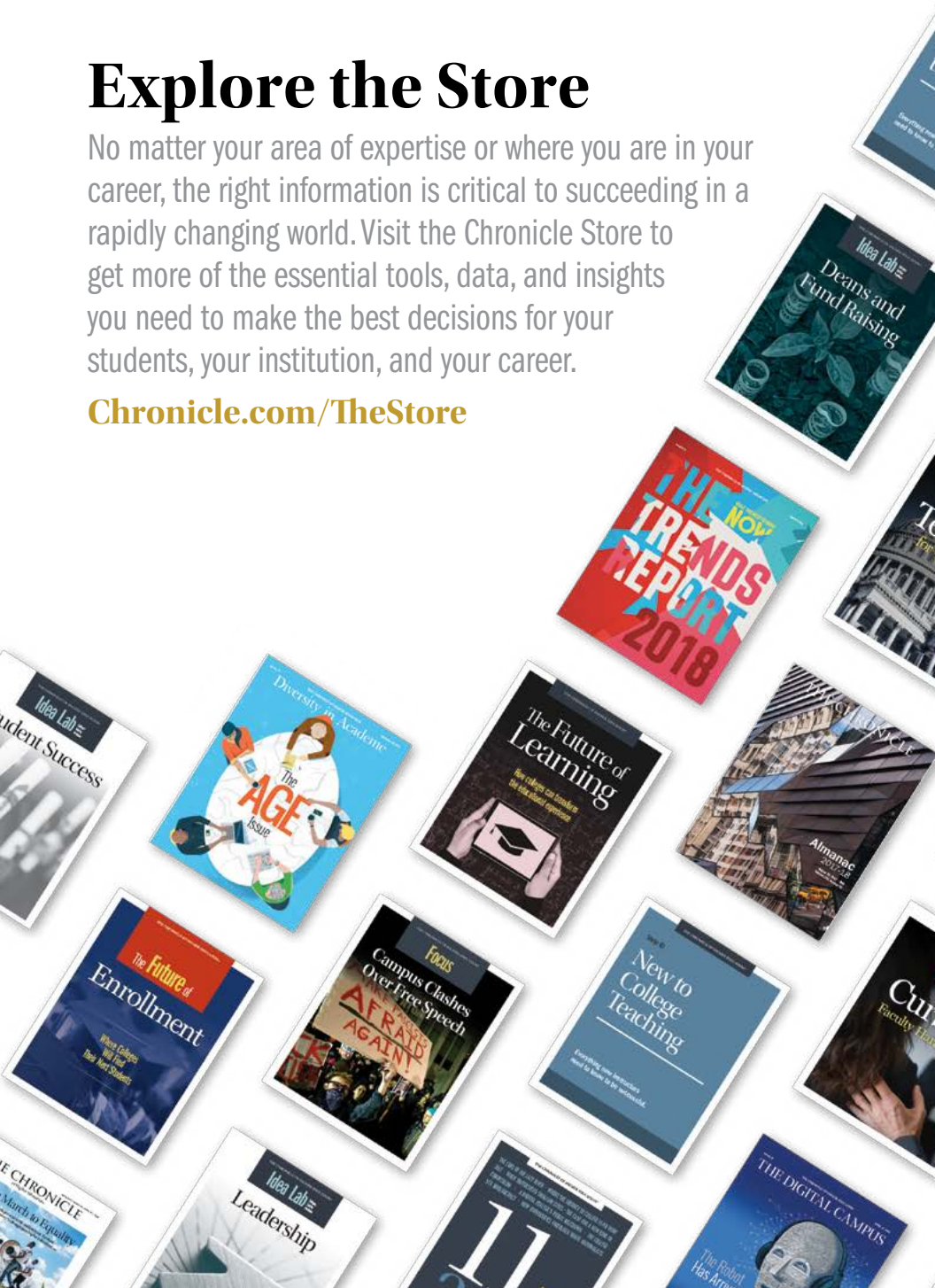
Social media is not for everyone. It can feel salesy and slick and, well, young. And, as we all know from various Twittergates, the content can get you into trouble. But the changes in marketing are, in many ways, for the good — prompting publishers, Pfund said, “to engage more, rather than just marketing in a rote manner.”

*Adapted from an essay by Rachel Toor, a professor of creative writing at Eastern Washington University, in Spokane, and a former acquisitions editor at Oxford University Press and Duke University Press.*

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