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Recommended Citation

Garofalo, Mary, "Time Management for Academic Writing: Overcoming Writer's Block" (2022). *General Research*. 10.

https://digitalcommons.kean.edu/general_research/10

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Time Management for Academic Writing: Overcoming Writer's Block
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What's the Deal?

Academic writing can be very daunting. This is particularly true from those brave folks who are working on their research proposals, capstone projects, or dissertations. The vast majority of people who are facing the task of this kind of academic writing have a lot riding on the successful completion of and presentation of their writing. They also have lives outside of courses and writing. This pressure often compounds the already intimidating task of writing in bulk, and writing well.

So, how do you write, meet deadlines, and function effectively in all of the other parts of your life? Great question- and one that every person facing this challenge deals with on a continual basis. There is a lot of advice on how to avoid procrastination, complete writing projects, and do it all with ease (well, maybe not ease). Let's talk about realistic expectations. Setting yourself up for success looks different for everyone. Lives are complicated and more than likely you are already feeling like you are stretched very thin with all of your responsibilities- whatever they may be. Completing academic writing for your dissertation can take a back seat to all the other issues in life. Statistically speaking, only about 50% of students who enter a doctoral program persist. Many leave programs as "ABDs," meaning they have completed program requirements "All But Dissertation." What are some reasons that students do not complete their dissertations? According to Castelló et al. (2017), students fail to persist in doctoral studies for both personal and institutional reasons:

1. Finances
2. Personal responsibilities
3. Self-doubt
4. Dissertation intimidation
5. Workload burnout
6. Lack of support

Interestingly enough, more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of the 732 people in the study were young female students who cited lack of support (at home and institutional) as the reason they did not persist in their doctoral studies (Castelló et al., 2016).

Additionally, some researchers suggest that although there is a transactional relationship to the stressors of writing the dissertation (i.e. there will be joy once it is finished), there is also empirical data to suggest that the stressors that are "baked in" to the process can negatively impact the health of dissertation candidates (Silinda, 2019).

“Specious Barriers” to Writing

We all have many reasons that we struggle to write. Paul Silvia (2017) describes several common barriers to academic writing for graduate students and academics in his cheeky, yet practical guide to academic writing. He calls these “specious barriers,” as they first appear to be legitimate hurdles that seem insurmountable. However, Silvia argues that under scrutiny, they are actually merely excuses.

“I can’t find time to write” (Silvia, 2017).

Silvia argues that you shouldn’t “find” time to write, rather you should “allot” time to work on your academic writing. Think about your week ahead- are there any chunks of time (even 20 minutes) between tasks or appointments that you can focus on writing? Also, think about the time of day you are most energized- write then. Silvia says that regularity in your writing is key to your success. Don’t check your email, texts, or social media. The best way to operate is without distraction. Also, there is some research to suggest that “binge writing” (Silvia, 2017; p. 26) is not productive. Consistent writing blocks of 20 minutes to 3 hours are sufficient, as long as they are consistent, regular, and productive. So, allot some time on your weekly schedule and make writing a priority.

“I need to read a few more articles” (Silvia, 2017).

This seems like a reasonable barrier. Who wants to write when you are uncertain about the depth and breadth of the research on your topic? However, you can do more research, read more articles, crunch more statistics, do more analysis during your allotted writing time. This could mean you print out a few more articles, read and annotate them during that time. During the following scheduled writing block, start writing it up- whatever that looks like.

“In order to write a lot, I need a new... chair, computer, desk, etc.” (Silvia, 2017).

Silvia (2017) snarkily calls this barrier the “most desperate” of all the hurdles to writing. Equipment will never help you write “a lot.” Instead, use whatever you have at your disposal. If you find yourself saying “I need a printer so I can print out articles- then I can write”- find a printer and write there. If you “need a comfy chair to write”- go to the library, find your favorite chair, and write there.

“I’m waiting until I feel like it” or “I write best when I feel inspired to write” (Silvia, 2017).

So, great news, if we all waited to feel inspired or be in the mood, no one would publish anything. Silvia (2017) says writing breeds great ideas for writing. Your writing doesn’t have to be good, you just have to get something down in your allotted time.

Other Stressors of Writing

The research over the last 30 years suggests that approximately 40% of students (globally) who enroll in a doctoral program do not complete the dissertation (Silinda, 2019). In addition to the difficulties students trying to balance all of the roles they are responsible for (Castelló et al., 2017), there are well-documented stressors that all doctoral students deal with. Procrastination

in the form of delaying research activities, lack of organization, lack of follow through and lack structure have a correlational relationship with the rate of attrition, meaning students who leave doctoral programs without completing the requirements for the degree (Silinda, 2019). It is important to acknowledge that you will have stress. Also, that there are ways to cope with the stressors- you just have to know where to look for them.

Strategies to Cope

It would be important to remove as many obstacles to your writing as possible. That may include taking the offensive stance and seeking help before you start writing. Know thyself- what are your blind spots?

1. Ask colleagues, department faculty, and your mentor for advice for each section of the dissertation as you approach it. Find out what worked for your colleagues and what didn't. You don't have to reinvent the wheel but you have to do what works for you.
2. Try to anticipate the areas of writing that you will struggle with (i.e. the theoretical/ conceptual framework) and try to troubleshoot ahead of time. If you are nervous about the literature review, print out and read the studies (5 at a time) and build your literature review matrix first. Then, you will have foundational knowledge to begin writing in your scheduled session.
3. Ask your mentor and a family member to keep you accountable for your writing time and time frame. This also means that you keep in close contact with your mentor, ask for feedback early and often.
4. Break up each scheduled writing session into plausible tasks- do not bite off more than you can chew in one session- the odds are you will be overwhelmed and shut down.
5. Print out/ download dissertations that are closely related to your topic, methods, population, etc. Having a model of what you are aiming towards can be very helpful not only with length and structure but also diction and phrasing.
6. If positive reinforcement works for you, bring treats for yourself and create a rewards system based on your writing session goals.
7. Try to write in the same place and at the same time as often as possible. You will begin to acclimate to your environment and associate it with writing (and most likely caffeine).

Breaking Writer's Block

Everyone experiences writer's block. The key is to not allow momentary fear or feelings of being overwhelmed to stymie your progress. Silvia (2017) has some very practical advice to break writer's block (p. 41):

1. Write 200 words.
2. Print what you have written, read, and revise it.
3. Write 3 paragraphs of general discussion on your topic.

4. Add missing citations or references and reconcile your reference page.
5. Reread reviewers' comments and make revisions.
6. Make a list of writing goals for the week.

All in All

This will be the most challenging and yet the most rewarding part of your academic life. Sometimes, it comes down to just hanging in there. Other times, it is about typing one word, and then another. So, what are the takeaways?

1. Allot time for writing. Make time for writing. Instead of finding time to write, stick to schedule. Use your planner, calendar, or whatever you use to keep a schedule. Be sure to mark time on your calendar to write, regularly.
2. Set goals, monitor progress, and plan your next writing session.
3. Start your own "Overcoming Agraphia Group." Agraphia is the pathological loss of the ability to write (Silvia, 2017).
4. Drink caffeine- in any form.

References

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