

Six factors influencing academic writing productivity and satisfaction



Writing satisfaction is strongly linked to publishing productivity and, potentially, career success. **Chris Smith** reports on research investigating the tools and systems academics from all career stages use to keep writing and publishing. Age, experience, and having a sense of certainty about what sort of writing system suits you and your life are all important to productivity and overall satisfaction. Early-career researchers may struggle with external pressures and barriers such as procrastination or feeling overwhelmed which cause most dissatisfaction, but these feelings do slowly ebb away. The more experience you gain, the more likely you'll have found a writing system that works, and the more productive, satisfied – and hopefully successful – you'll be.

For the ambitious academic, focus fixed on producing world-changing research, feeling happy about your writing process might only be a secondary concern, at best. But the interim findings of our survey questioning the writing “habits” of academics – now with 510 responses from over 40 countries – indicate that writing satisfaction is strongly linked to publishing productivity and, potentially, career success.

Over the past four months we've been investigating the tools and systems academics use to keep writing and publishing. The study was inspired by initial research I [wrote about](#) here in February. Our aim is to build a picture of the scholarly writing and publishing process over an academic lifetime – from PhD to full professor – and to draw some recommendations about how scholars might be better supported at each stage of their career. So far, the results are intriguing:

1. Experience and age – writing dissatisfaction peaks early, but it gets better

The research finds that academics become more satisfied with their writing process over time, as they develop the tools and techniques to help them keep writing and publishing. Whilst the data doesn't suggest a smooth rise in writing satisfaction (there are some real low points at the mid-career stage, which we want to explore), it does point to levels of satisfaction increasing over time – or, at least, dissatisfaction ebbing away.

Data shows that, during their careers, scholars are most satisfied with their writing process after 25 years' experience and after age 55. This is also when they feel under least pressure to produce. Scholars are most dissatisfied with their writing – by quite a significant margin – at the very beginning of their careers (0-2 years). This is also the time at which they feel under most pressure to write and publish too.

“I really struggle. I'd like to go on a writing retreat but as an early-career researcher with a young family and little spare money – I can't make it work.”

“I teach part-time and I'm working on a PhD – I also have small children so staying in a routine is difficult as their needs fluctuate. It's hard to stick with a routine when others depend on you.”

2. Systems and routines – have one and be certain about it

Academics most satisfied with their writing process either always do certain things to help themselves write, or say they don't need to do anything in particular, they just write as and when they need to. Those most dissatisfied are unsure whether they've found anything that helps, so presumably their process is a bit hit and miss.

Whilst using certain tactics and having some kind of personal writing system or routine – such as using a simple time-blocking method – is helpful to stay on track, the data indicates that it's more important for scholars to have *certainty* about their process.

The research doesn't point to any specific tactic or any combination of tactics being “the solution” to writing productivity, but it does indicate that having some kind of personal system and having clarity about what that system is makes all the difference.

“During heavy teaching periods I always block out two or three days per week – or just parts of those days. When I’m not teaching I set aside blocks of six days. I know I need at least a day off each week.”

“I have gotten into the bad habit of waiting until the deadline’s on me – as a result I always write in a state of panic.”

3. Pressure – expect it but watch out for external sources

82% of academics surveyed feel pressure to write and publish more than they currently do – perhaps no surprise there. But 65% of those people say that pressure is primarily felt internally rather than coming from external sources – so, from personal career ambitions and a desire to progress in one’s field, rather than from institutional targets, colleagues, supervisors, or management.

However, those academics most dissatisfied with their writing and publishing are also the ones who experience the most external pressure. Whilst internal pressure to publish continues at a high level until late career, this is not necessarily linked to high levels of dissatisfaction. This might suggest academics accept internal pressure as part of the job. One to explore...

“A high teaching load means minimal time for writing beyond lectures, lesson plans and marking feedback. But I know my research outputs and publications are the thing I need to work on for career advancement, not my teaching.”

“I’d love to be more consistent with my writing. I go through productive phases, but when things like external issues put me off, I sometimes go off the rails completely.”

4. Barriers – psychological blockers are hardest to cope with

Although academics experience all kinds of daily writing barriers and challenges, the research indicates that some of these are more harmful to overall satisfaction than others. For example, whilst academics commonly admit that student interruptions, admin, and workload get in the way of their writing and research and are tough to handle, they’re not necessarily linked to high levels of dissatisfaction. Perhaps scholars just see barriers like these as part of the job?

Although fewer academics say they’re held back from their writing by things like procrastination, feeling overwhelmed, or negative emotions, experiencing barriers like these are linked very strongly to feelings of dissatisfaction. It’s also barriers like these that are experienced most acutely in the early stages of a career.

“I’m paralysed by procrastination especially in the face of large blocks of time. I play ‘chicken’ with deadlines. I hate the way I write.”

“I procrastinate when I’m stuck for ideas. I know I spend a lot of time ‘data mining’ to put off the writing.”

5. Outputs – understand that some types of writing might be less satisfying (and some might be more)

The study finds a link between productivity and writing satisfaction but suggests that academics should be mindful about what they spend their time writing, if they value their happiness.

The academics who write most – in terms of volume of work and variety of output – are also those most satisfied with their writing process. However, whilst hardly an optional part of an academic role, writing grant applications and white papers makes people feel most dissatisfied with their writing processes, by quite a significant margin, whilst writing books, book chapters, and monographs make scholars feel most satisfied.

Whilst writing journal articles was the single most common type of scholarly output, writing them was neither linked to high levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. This might indicate that academics consider journal writing in quite pragmatic terms – as part of the job.

“I just wrote an entire monograph in less than four months and feel really great about the content. My system is working really well.”

“My practice will probably always remain a balancing act between the tasks I have to do and the ones which are ‘shiny things’.”

6. Career – study STEM, be a professor, work in Australia

Professors are more likely to feel highly satisfied with their writing process than any other group, with lecturers and instructors feeling particularly dissatisfied. Academics teaching and researching sciences, technology, engineering, maths, and medicine are the most satisfied with their writing process, with those studying the social sciences, business, and law being the least satisfied. Chemists are particularly happy – anyone know why?!

Incidentally, the demographic found to be most satisfied with writing and publishing (by quite a large margin) is female professors, aged between 35-44, working in STEM subjects, living in Australia. Most dissatisfied were male lecturers, aged between 35-44, working in the social sciences, business, management, or law, and living in the UK.

“I’m always learning about my writing process. It always helps me to step back and ask ‘what do I want to say here?’”

“I’m pretty happy with my schedule right now. But next week, next month, tomorrow.... who the hell knows?!”

Conclusion

Our interim findings don’t reveal the secret sauce of scholarly writing and publishing success, but the data does point to a number of factors that might impact on an academic’s satisfaction, productivity, and general stress levels throughout their career. Age, experience, and, crucially, having a sense of certainty about what sort of writing system suits you and your life are all important to productivity, but also to overall satisfaction.

Whilst the data indicates that academics at an early stage of their careers face real challenges, things do get better. Early-career researchers may struggle with external pressure and the kind of barriers that cause most dissatisfaction – like procrastination and feeling overwhelmed – but these feelings do slowly ebb away. The more experienced you are, the more likely you’ll be to have found a writing system that works, the more you’ll produce, and the more satisfied – and hopefully successful – you’ll be.

The short survey is [still open](#) as we’d like to grow our dataset further. Contribute and we’ll keep you updated! Ultimately, our aim is to create a data visualisation of scholarly writing practice across a career.

Featured image credit: [Jon Lalin](#), via Unsplash (licensed under a [CC0 1.0](#) license).

Note: This article represents the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the author

Chris Smith is a startup co-founder interested in using behavioural science and positive persuasive technology to unlock human potential.