

Beyond publish or perish – Exploring the multi-faceted benefits of academic writing

*The phrase ‘publish or perish’ suggests that the purpose of academic writing is in and of itself to be published. Drawing on qualitative research into academic writing practices, **Marion Heron, Karen Gravett and Nadya Yakovchuk** suggest that the ‘publish or perish’ concept obscures much of the value in academic writing that resides in writing as a process, and the opportunities it presents academics to individually and collaboratively develop and innovate.*

Writing for publication is often described as a site of frustration, anxiety and fear. The phrase ‘publish or perish’ is pervasive in higher education and reflects the very real pressures academics experience amidst the demands of the contemporary university. However, despite its wide currency, the binary presented by the idea of ‘publish or perish’ suggests that much of the complexity of academic writing might in practice be lost. This gap is what we wanted to unpack and consider in our [recent study](#).

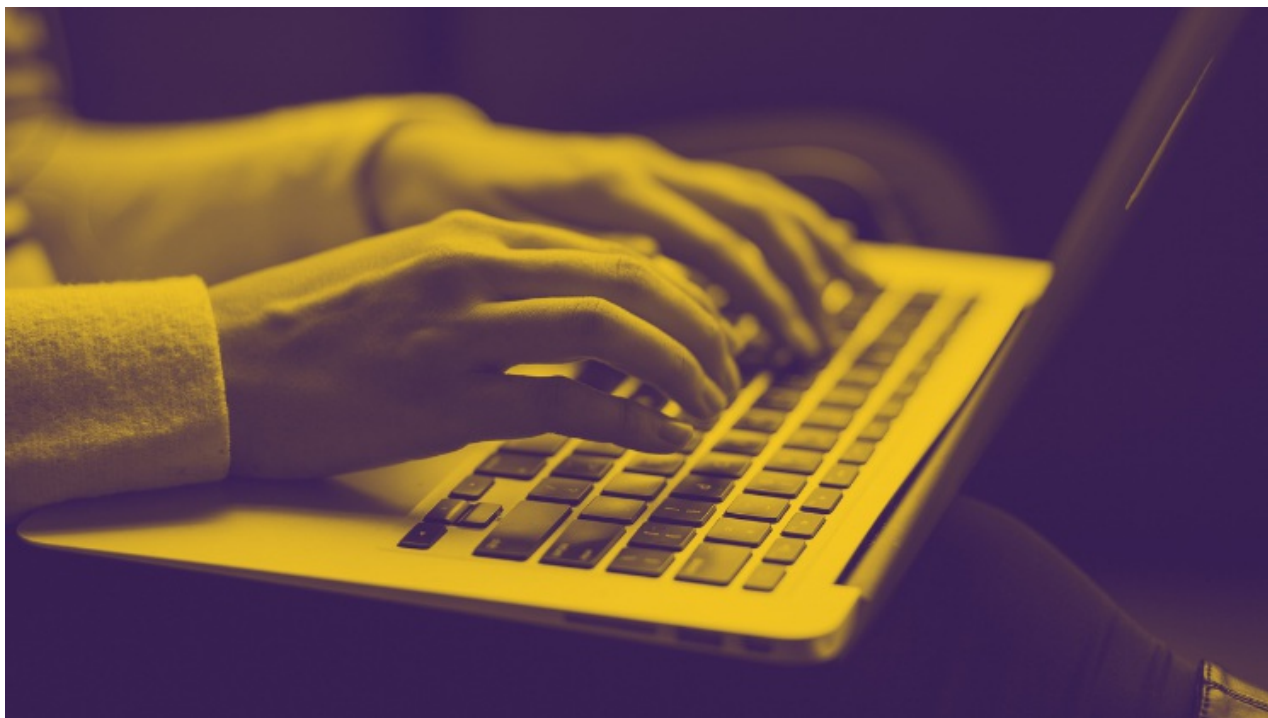
As writers, teachers and academics ourselves we wondered what might exist beyond the common, negative, description of writing for publication as a *product*, and of writing itself as a source of anxiety. We wanted to explore the more positive aspects to writing that may have been overlooked, or that might be useful to our understanding of writing practices and academic life. To do this, we interviewed seven academics in the field of higher education, at different career stages, and asked them to reflect on critical incidents that they had experienced in their scholarly writing practices. All participants were research active and engaged in writing practices. Critical incidents were used because they focus on accounts of events which occur in participants’ everyday practice.

Acknowledging the tensions

Our purpose was not to deny that real challenges and tensions exist for academics in contemporary higher education. Indeed, in acknowledging these we found that both the need to publish and the process of publication, in particular the peer review process, may compromise creativity and restrict the opportunity to push boundaries. Institutional expectations in terms of what counts as valid writing genres were also perceived as negatively impacting on feelings around academic writing.

Flourishing

However, although the data revealed a variety of challenges in writing for scholarly publication, it also surfaced a strong theme highlighting positive experiences of this process. In many cases, writing was not simply about avoiding ‘perishing’, but was instead about actively flourishing. Flourishing was a result of deeper thinking, individually and collaboratively, as well as developing interests.



Writing for thinking

For example, participants spoke about how the act of writing helped them to articulate their ideas. So instead of viewing writing as an end product, writing and thinking were intertwined, involving a reciprocal and symbiotic relationship, as discussed by this participant:

“Writing helps me think. And, very often, when I start writing an article or whatever, I have an idea of what I’m going to do but the end product is not necessarily what I envisaged. So that the writing process helps me think and helps me add coherence to the activities that I undertake.”

In this sense the value of writing lies in the process itself.

Collaboration and collegiality

Some participants highlighted the affordances of co-authorship and the process of collaborating on a writing project. Here the benefits were not only relational, but also cognitive. A synergy is created with writers from different research backgrounds working together. In this way writers see how others work and take inspiration and ideas from the writing experiences. For example:

“I’ve got as much to learn from them as they have from me. I think that’s kind of what I see. There’s no best way of writing things. It’s just that we all have our differences, so I’m just quite interested in finding out a little bit more about what other people do, and why that works well.”

Writers can learn the craft of writing from each other and find value in the synergy created by differences.

Interests and repertoires

Some participants also talked about enjoying writing for publication because it is driven by their own interests and preferences. Some felt they can be quite autonomous in drawing on their repertoires of theories, methodologies and writing experiences to create different kinds of publications and narratives. Despite dominant and often restrictive genre regimes in higher education, writing can still offer academics a valuable space for self-expression, growth and, significantly, joy.

We found from the study that there is much to be gained from thinking about writing for publication not as a product, but as a *process* in which academics develop their thinking, make connections and collaborate. Many of our participants viewed writing for publication as pleasurable. Through writing, colleagues felt free to challenge and engage with their subject more creatively. Writing in our study was also seen as a support for thinking, either individually or in groups. Colleagues talked about how the articulation of thoughts through writing helped them to understand their own arguments and how writing in groups was an opportunity to discuss and learn from each other. All of our participants reflected on how writing is a risky, but life-enhancing venture. And many talked about their learned resilience against the sometimes harsh criticism, from both the [peer reviewers of journals](#) and [their own peers](#).

We do not suggest that real challenges do not exist for academics trying to write. Certainly, the difficulties and inequalities of the Covid pandemic have worsened the situation for a lot of writers and particularly those with increased caring responsibilities or health concerns. Some academic writers may have been unable to even contemplate writing during recent times, and yet the pressure to publish has not gone away. At the same time, the opportunities to come together and collaborate on writing projects may be a source of optimism and joy for colleagues if they are able to find time and space to write and are supported to do so. In our study we also explored [Lee and Boud's](#) argument that scholarly writing can engender both fear and desire. We found that desire was a key motivator in taking writing forward, in engaging in writing ventures and in developing strategies to manage the competing discourses of creativity and performativity. We suggest that a reframing of writing for publication as 'publish *and* flourish' can be helpful in order to highlight and celebrate the positive experiences that engaging in academic writing can bring.

This post draws on the authors' paper, [Publishing and flourishing: writing for desire in higher education](#), published in Higher Education Research & Development.

Note: This review gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics.

Image Credit: Adapted from [Kaitlyn Baker](#) via Unsplash.
