

Lives change across academic careers – so should your writing habits

*Are your writing habits the same as they were when you started your academic career? Are your lifestyle and responsibilities the same? In this post, **Chris Smith** explores how writing habits formed at the beginning of academic careers can be difficult to change later on and suggests that mindfully reassessing your writing practice can help reshape it to meet your needs.*

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Habits can be picked up at any stage of life, but when it comes to academic writing, your formative years can be influential. Not only in shaping how you cope with the barriers that you'll face later down the line, but also to your wellbeing and health.

One of our coaching clients is an experienced, tenure-tracked professor. While she's been writing for 30+ years, she often falls back into using the same method to get the writing done she relied on when she was a PhD. That being, she crams before a deadline and writes late into the night. It's an approach that in many ways has served her well – she's been published multiple times after all. But it's become a habit that she wants to quit because it's started to affect her health.

Old beliefs die hard

We all pick up good habits and bad habits across the course of our lives. But sometimes, the things that worked for us at one stage don't work anymore. The problems come when we don't notice that we've become wedded to these habits and accept them without question. When we do this it can be damaging to us. It can lead to feelings of guilt because we start to wonder why we can't write like we used to – why it now seems so hard. But we expect other things to change in our lives – why not how we approach the writing?

You'd be surprised to know the number of senior academics we know and work with who use the same – or a very similar – process to write now as they did when they were at PhD stage.

It's common for academics to believe that the only way to do the writing is to cram like an undergrad student on caffeine tablets before an exam. It's also common for scholars to assume that quality writing only happens in long, unbroken (ideally uninterrupted) chunks of time. For many, this idea has become ingrained in them and leads to them rejecting any other approach.



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Fixed beliefs like these can lead to negative spirals because when the reality of work and family life prevents us from achieving the perfection we seek, frustration and disappointment can set in. I've listened to experienced scholars doubt their abilities because they've 'failed' to write in the way they feel they *should* be writing – when all they've done is miss their own unrealistic, self-imposed standard.

In our coaching programmes we find that when academics are given the space to try something new – like write in smaller chunks of time or in a more spontaneous fashion – they're often surprised to learn that these approaches can work well. They often wonder why they've never tried them before. In fact, academia is peculiar in that despite writing being a key skill, it is largely left to individuals to develop their own writing practice.

Realistically, there will be things that you may struggle to do – like write through the night – as you get older. As your life changes, you will gain new responsibilities. Your priorities will change too and so will the number of interruptions and distractions in your life. Accepting this reality is important if you are to ditch the unhelpful thoughts and bad habits that are holding you back.

The art of noticing

Professor Robert Boice was an early inspiration. He was a psychologist working in the 1980s and 1990s who pioneered research into scholarly writing productivity. His findings concluded that there was only one way to get the writing done – a little every day. And in many cases, that's true. While Boice's work was influential, it was far too dogmatic. This is something writing scholar [Helen Sword has written about extensively](#) too.

Our work with writers over the years [has found](#) there's no one way to get the writing done; there are many. The key is to find a process that works for you now in the busyness of your life and not rely on the habits that might have worked once but don't work anymore. So how do you do that?

For us, it all starts with the simple act of noticing and reflection. If you're not aware of the things you do and believe, you'll never change them. It's a process that's rooted in the work of the psychologist [Ellen J. Lander](#). Through decades of research, she finds that becoming more *mindful* is one of the most powerful things you can do to improve the quality of your life – from relationships to your health to your career.

Data gathering

At this point, you might be raising a sceptical scholarly eyebrow at the idea of becoming more mindful about your writing – we're used to this. So instead, think of it like conducting an audit – but this time, on yourself. As an academic, you'd never base a conclusion on assumption; you'd base it on data. So, apply the same principles to your own beliefs about how to get the writing done.

What behaviours and habits do you have connected to your writing? What assumptions do you have about how the writing *should* be done or how you *ought* to do it? Are there any beliefs and thought patterns that you typically fall into? If so, what are they and what are they based on?

Time to act

It's human nature to make assumptions, but sometimes our habits become so ingrained in us they become invisible. When this happens, we often keep repeating them. Breaking the cycle starts with becoming more aware of the things you take for granted.

How you write will change as you and your life changes. Notice your assumptions and take action as a result. What worked once might not work for you now. What works for you now might not work later on – and that's just fine. Find what works for you *right now* – and the good news is that this approach can work for you at any stage of your life.

Alongside *Bec Evans*, *Chris Smith* is also the author of a [forthcoming book](#) outlining their approach to writing coaching and strategies for getting your writing unstuck.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, the LSE Impact blog or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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