

Recognise academic writing as a craft... and when you're 80 per cent happy, kick it out the door!

by Blog Admin

September 4, 2012

It's easy to agonize over every word and grow frustrated at a stunted word count. Here, [Helen Sword](#) explains how she stops herself from spending days pushing words around in circles and joins W.B. Yeats, Oscar Wilde and Ernest Hemingway as she embraces slower, well-tempered academic writing as a craft.



Printed from:  For Advertisers

As a painfully slow writer who agonizes over every sentence, I have days when I feel as though I'm doing nothing more than pushing words around in circles. My average writing-time-to-publication rate is a pathetic 100 words per hour, which means that even a brief, breezy post such as this one will take me several hours to whip into shape.

At least I'm in good company. W. B. Yeats, in his poem "[Adam's Curse](#)" describes the effort that goes into apparently effortless writing:

*A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.*

A biographer of Oscar Wilde offers the following [anecdote](#):

He [Wilde] related also, with much gusto, how in a country-house he had told his host one evening that he had spent the day in hard literary work, and that, when asked what he had done, he had said, "I was working on the proof of one of my poems all the morning and took out a comma." "And in the afternoon?" "In the afternoon-well, I put it back again."

Ernest Hemingway [penned](#) no fewer than thirty-nine different endings to his novel *A Farewell to Arms*.

Do all good writers agonize over their writing? Over the past year I have been interviewing academics from across the disciplines and around the world about their work – more than 80 interviews so far, and counting. A few of my interview subjects have told me that writing comes easily for them; for example Keith Devlin, the author of thirty-two books on popular mathematics, admitted that he once wrote an entire book in three weeks, working mostly in airplanes and hotel rooms. But he's a rare bird, a person with an unusually high intellectual metabolism. For the vast majority of successful academics, writing well is a slow business.

Here are some tips for minimizing the frustration:

- Recognize writing as a craft, an artisanal endeavor. Take pleasure and pride in constructing an elegant argument, shaping a well-tempered paragraph, polishing a sentence until it gleams.
- Write first, edit later. This technique won't necessarily suit everyone; however, if you're the kind of person who goes round and round in circles trying to construct a perfect sentence before you move on to composing the next one, you might well find it transformational. (I did!)
- As you edit, keep moving back and forth between the "big picture" and the minor details. Janelle Jansted, an associate professor at the University of Victoria in Canada, talks about distinguishing between the "rough cut" and the "finishing cut," terminology borrowed from the building trade. Shape, polish, polish, shape....

- Know when to say “Enough.” That doesn’t mean your writing is perfect. It will never be perfect. If you’re 80-90 per cent happy with something you’ve written, kick it out the door.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the author:

Helen Sword is Associate Professor in the Centre for Academic Development at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. She has published widely on modernist literature, higher education pedagogy, academic writing and digital poetry. Her new book, *Stylish Academic Writing*, is published by Harvard University Press.

Readers can find out more about Helen Sword [here](#), and sign up to her newsletter by emailing h.sword@auckland.ac.nz.

Related posts:

1. [The road to academic success is paved with stylish academic writing](#)
2. [How to bury your academic writing](#)
3. [The impact agenda in Canada: how researchers and research councils have found an impact measurement that nearly everyone is happy with.](#)
4. [Is writing a book chapter a waste of time?](#)
5. [Your essential 'how-to' guide to writing good abstracts](#)