

Six academic writing habits that will boost productivity



*What's the secret to a productive spell of writing? **Chris Smith** shares insights gleaned from interviews with a diverse group of academics, from which a number of common academic writing habits stood out. These range from the simple acts of scheduling and setting self-imposed deadlines, to both formal and informal accountability partnerships and the use of "freewriting" techniques which help authors write their way out of blocks.*

Today, many academics feel stuck between a rock and a hard place. They're under huge pressure to write and publish but an ever-growing mountain of teaching and admin is stopping them doing just that. Our research finds that whilst nobody is immune to these pressures, some academics cope better than others – and that's because over the years, they've developed personal "systems" to help them write.

We recently carried out in-depth interviews with 23 scholars across the UK, Europe and the US. We deliberately chose a diverse group so as to not make any assumptions based on age, seniority, or research background. Academic experience ranged from six months to 27 years and subject fields ranged from social sciences, economics, business, and arts.

We did this as part of our user research to inform the development of [Prolifiko](#) – a digital coaching tool for writers. Whilst every academic had developed a writing productivity system personal to them, we found there were six common "habits" that the most prolific (and generally least stressed) academics tended to use.

1. They "time-block" their writing in advance

Scheduling – booking in time to write in advance – was the single most common habit of our writers. It didn't appear to matter what type of time-blocking method a scholar chose to use or how lengthy a writing session was. Some blocked out long periods of time on sabbatical, whilst others preferred to block out short, regular times throughout the day or across a week.

What seemed to matter far more was the act of planning, as this mentally prepared the individual for writing – and so made the process easier and less stressful.

"When I need to write I block out time. I'm lucky in that I can work from home – I block out a couple of straight days to do the writing and I plan it in beforehand. I couldn't really write in any other way than blocking out that time."

2. They set themselves artificial deadlines

Academics know their productivity slips when they're not set external deadlines. This is especially relevant to those writing books, monographs, or case studies which all involve significant time working alone. Whilst scholars don't always enjoy the pressure of external deadlines, they do recognise that they focus the mind.

Many of the most prolific writers create self-imposed writing deadlines to keep them moving forwards. One popular method is to use upcoming conference presentations as milestones. Some deliberately use these occasions as an extrinsic motivator because they know that they will be held accountable by peers – and this keeps them focused.

"I'll use conferences as deadlines in terms of when I need to have the next thing ready. I know the research – I'm a psychologist. I use artificial milestones to keep me motivated."

3. They deliberately seek "flow" (but don't push themselves if they can't find it)

Prolific academics deliberately arrange their working lives to achieve the personal "flow" state they need to deliver a writing project. However, those who have the easiest (and most productive) relationship with writing tend to know when to stop trying to find this flow state. They don't push themselves when they can't achieve the "headspace" they need. Typically, they take a break to go and do something else rather than straining every sinew to write.

“When I’m in the flow then it’s great but I’ve learned not to push myself either. If it’s not coming then I stop. It’s frustrating but trying to write when you can’t is damaging. You have to accept it!”

4. They design accountability structures around themselves

The most productive scholars use some kind of accountability system to help them write – although these systems were all very different. Some academics have developed formal accountability partnerships with colleagues (exchanging drafts with each other, agreeing word counts and deadlines). Others take a more informal approach and simply prefer to work collaboratively. Collaborative working makes scholars feel less alone in their writing endeavours; they find the simple, personal commitment of having to write for someone else gives them the motivational push they need to keep going.

“I use co-authoring as a psychological trigger. When you have to deliver to someone else it really makes you get your butt in the chair – disappointing someone else is a lot tougher than disappointing yourself.”

5. They use small steps and short deadlines to tackle large projects

Prolific academics have learned how to structure their writing processes to avoid being overfaced with large writing projects. Most often, they do this by using a “small-steps” methodology whereby they approach a large writing goal incrementally or with short deadlines. Sometimes this is achieved by splitting the task down into smaller chunks – for example by deliberately approaching the project chapter by chapter – or by “easing themselves in” to large writing projects by taking on small writing projects first.

“Sometimes when you’re at the beginning of a new project it feels like an enormous mountain. You really need to cut it into small pieces in order to conquer it – otherwise you never start. First write the literature review or do part of the data – that is easier.”

6. They “write their way” out of their blocks

Scholars find starting new projects the toughest part of the writing process, with senior academics citing the “weight of expectation” felt. Many say they get stuck in the “chasm” between one project ending and another beginning. At this point, productive academics tend to “write their way” out of their blocks and deliberately take on a series of small projects to keep the momentum going. Many recommend using “freewriting” – a non-judgemental unblocking technique where the author gets words on the page without looking back and without editing – to get out of their rut.

“My advice to PhDs is to avoid the gaps in between research because it’s in those gaps that you lose confidence – you have to keep writing. Even if it’s only smaller articles. You have to keep going and keep engaged.”

Hidden systems

Whilst every academic we interviewed had developed their own individual system to help them write, only one scholar explicitly said that they “had a system” of their own. Everyone else didn’t know (and perhaps didn’t much care) that they had developed techniques – through years of trial and error – that help them keep writing. But everyone can learn from these hidden writing systems; it’s these that will help all academics stay focused and productive, and become more successful.

[Prolifiko](#) is a digital coach for writing productivity. It uses a behavioural science-backed system to help researchers and academics keep writing and meet their publishing targets. The Prolifiko team is seeking an academic partner to help them investigate how digital interventions can impact academic writing productivity – to find out more contact chris@prolifiko.com

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About the author

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