

## Writing Tips and Resources

### Writing Advice – Getting Started & Motivation

- Paralyzed by the amount of information I had to write about, a friend suggested I start by writing down everything I thought I needed to say without judgment, no using the backspace key. For my dissertation I found this method most effective when I started with an outline of each chapter and with a few guiding words about what each subsection would contain. Once I had this, I would pick a section and just write all of the thoughts I had about that section. If I had a thought about tying it to a different area or adding a reference I would literally write “LINK TO XXXX SECTION B/C of XXXX”. Once you have all the thoughts out of your head you can begin shaping them into coherent paragraphs.
- Warm up with writing prompts. I start each writing session with a writing prompt for three minutes where I write continuously for the whole duration. I alternate between writing by hand and typing in a saved file of writing prompts. As the writer Natalie Goldberg instructed, keep your hand moving. If there is a moment where I have a blank thought and a pause, I came up with the phrase “Keep writing!” where I write that over and over again until my inspiration comes back. I encourage you to come up with your own filler phrase. I write for the full three minutes. I find my prompts online, through this great book of things to write about, and from an app on my phone, Brainsparker, that includes thought provoking prompts like “What is your soul calling you to do?” and even pictures that are incredibly moving to write about.
- Remember that writing is hard. It’s a skill that we have to work at to develop, but there are some great resources out there to help. I highly recommend Paul Silvia’s book *How to Write a Lot, and others recommended by GradHackers* ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

### Writing Advice – Planning & Revising

- Start the literature review earlier: remember all of the background from all of the projects I had ever done in the last four years. Get a jump start on your introduction by writing a literature review for publication or setting aside a couple of days a month to write paragraphs over the articles you’ve been reading, even if you’re a few years out from graduating.
- Leave enough time for revision. A great strategy for writing is to start with a crappy rough draft (get rid of the blank page) then to go back, pull out your Strunk and White, and only then begin editing. The idea is to focus on the ideas first, then worry about structure, style, and grammar afterwards. If you’re doing this, make sure to leave enough time to do a really good job of revising because it will almost always take longer than you expect. Ideally, I like to also leave an additional day when I don’t look at my work to get some distance from the project—it’s easier to edit with a “fresh” set of eyes.
- Write first. It is easy to procrastinate on writing and do menial tasks instead, such as checking email or social media, or cleaning the house or reading the news. I would “reward” myself with these distracting indulgences after I completed my writing for the day.

- Divide your writing goals into chunks and accomplish them one step at a time. This strategy works well in combination with scheduling writing time. Set short-term goals like finishing certain sections by the end of the day. Silvia suggests keeping a record of your writing schedule and what you've accomplished to hold you to your goals.
- Write every day. The author Anaïs Nin simply stated, "*I write every day.*" There has been much research conducted on the positive effects of writing every day in academia, including that of psychologist Robert Boice. I learned to start with 15 minutes and have worked up to 30 minutes every day with an ultimate goal of reaching an hour by the end of the academic year. I like to think broadly of writing to include brainstorming, reading, outlining, and synthesizing, but I have restructured my plan to write every day to focus on word count, so that means I am truly writing. There are many apps (Focus Keeper, Block & Flow, 30/30) that can help with this timed writing session. I also have been exploring more sophisticated options for time and project management such as Rescue Time and Liquid Planner (which is free to .edu emails). Some days I am writing for papers and projects, other days it's a manuscript I am working on, and often I write for me in what I call my "Spark Files," where I track ideas and inspiration in my academic career. I am currently writing 300-500 words a day in 30 minutes. By the end of the year, I aim to be writing for a solid hour for twice that amount.
- Write fast now, edit slow later. In meeting my word count goals, I am also focused on writing fast now, and editing slow later, a concept developed by Sonja K. Foss and William Waters. Writing is capturing ideas on paper. Editing is sculpting to express ideas effectively by scrutinizing, moving, removing, and transforming materials. You maximize your writing time when you separate the writing and editing as two processes. Separating writing and editing was a tough concept for someone like me to learn who loves to edit as I write (it satisfies the perfectionist in me!). Now, I turn off my spell and grammar checker and am focused only on getting the next word out. When I first started this concept, I taped a blank piece of paper over my screen to focus on writing. This was an excruciating experience, but I learned to write fast. I schedule in time to edit separately. My writing time is much more effective.
- "Only writing produces text." This was the mantra of our class. The dissertation is full of words and I learned that writing does not magically happen—I had to make it happen and put the words down on paper. Prior to the class, I had procrastinated on even starting to write because of my own insecurities including worrying about the strength of my project, getting it published, completing a Ph.D., etc. However, writing was therapeutic.

### Writing Advice - Creativity

- Spark creative thinking. Activities to get going: Graph It! Using Excel or Wordle, type in key words that stand out from an initial word brainstorming session. Look at a graph of the data to see if you can see trends, themes, or terms used more than once. Make a Knowledge Tree! Draw out relationships between your subjects, timelines of events, or any other hierarchy-based connections. Mine your Text! Use Wordle to evaluate text you've already written, or look through research papers or projects you've completed over the last 5-10 years. What were the subjects of your work? Any themes or key words standing out?

- Get rid of the blank page. While we might not be able to claim writer's block, we can still claim fear of a blank page. That bright white screen staring back at us is practically the stuff of nightmares. So get rid of it! Fill it up with outlines, references, plots, tables, and figures. Fill it up with ideas and lists. Start in the middle of a section, start in the middle of a paragraph. Whatever comes to mind, just make the blank page gone. When that blank page is covered with thoughts, then you can turn it into a coherent piece of writing.
- *You don't have to go in order.* You don't have to start at the beginning of your dissertation and write through until the end. This is where having chapter links and good formatting in your document can really help when jumping back and forth.
- Broaden your perspective on ways to write. When I get what I call "typing fatigue" and I am not very productive in my writing process, I switch things up. I handwrite sections. I use colorful Post-It notes to organize frameworks and outlines. One new alternative that I have explored and loved this year is dictation. I currently use the [Google Docs voice typing tool](#) to transcribe my thoughts. If this method works out, I want to look into investing in options such as [Dragon Dictation](#). Similarly, I pull out my phone and create a voice memo transitioning between meetings and classes when I have a thought that can shape my writing. I also invested in a [powerful writing software](#) that allows for more fluidity when I am working on big projects such as a final paper, manuscript, or thesis. There is more than one way to write, so make sure you explore all options and alternate between those that work best for you.
- Change your location. Not everyone will agree with me here, but I find that for long writing sessions, changing my location every few hours helps me stay focused. Having a change of scenery, noise level, and seating seems to wake up my brain. This nomadic writing style doesn't work well if writing is replaced with constant moving and settling in, but sometimes a change of environment can give us the kick that we need to keep going. Check out GradHacker's tips on [working efficiently in any location](#).

### Productivity & Maintaining Focus

- Scheduling meetings in the afternoon. Again, I protected my mornings, my most productive times of the day, and scheduled meetings in the afternoons.
- Gain momentum. I found that focusing the majority of my efforts on writing my first chapter was a great way to gain momentum for constantly thinking about my project and my writing as it evolved and came together. Proving to myself that I could produce good writing by prioritizing my ability to maintain focus, I was able to apply that confidence and those strategies to writing the rest of my dissertation.
- Make your group writing time more productive by sitting down for 5-10 minutes and laying out manageable goals for the writing session. Make sure these goals are realistic and achievable in the period the group meets. What can you accomplish in two hours? (On the note of realistic goals, meeting for more than three hours at a time is likely to become unproductive. Aim for 1-2 hours of solid, uninterrupted work time and some time at the end for discussion.)
- Schedule time. Writing takes a lot of mental energy, so it's easy to say that now is not a good time and put it off until later. Unfortunately, this can lead to putting it off until the next day, or the day after that, and before we know it, the deadline is here and we're still staring at a blank page (and calling it writer's block!). To avoid this, make a schedule and

stick to it. There are strategies that can help: keeping a record of your writing schedule or joining/making a writing group will help keep you accountable and motivated, and the Pomodoro technique (in short, 25 minutes of writing with 5 minute breaks) can help you stay focused.

- Turn your phone on airplane mode. If you're worried about someone needing to find you (such as your advisor, parents, or significant other) warn them in advance that you will be unreachable for a few hours at a time and that you will check in when you are back from writing. Turning your phone on airplane mode means no distracting texts but you can still listen to your music.
- Use your calendar to plan in advance. Especially if you're still tying up loose ends on experiments or are involved in organizations and hobbies around campus, it is unlikely you will get entire days to yourself where you can write uninterrupted. Do your best to plan activities one after another, such as put all your meetings in the morning so that you have the afternoon to write. I was never one of the people who had a consistent writing practice or designated time of day, but I was able to work on writing most days of the week since I planned a few days ahead and blocked out time.
- Find a hiding spot and bring snacks. Better yet, find multiple. Find a spot both on and off campus that is removed from your usual environment where no one is likely to find you. Guard the identity of that location closely. The idea is to have a couple places where you know you can focus and that you will not be interrupted without your consent. I had a corner in the library that was just a few buildings over from my desk but up a flight of stairs where no one went. This spot was great if I only had a few hours between meetings. I also had a desk at home where I knew the only person who would find me was my roommate, and she was very understanding about when I needed to not be disturbed. In all of these scenarios, come prepared with everything you will need to stay a while. You don't want to have to lose your spot because you got up for to grab a sandwich or end up stranded because you left your keys in the office.

### Self-Care and Planning Ahead

- Reward yourself. Scheduling time and setting small goals work really well if there's a reward for success. Finish a page? Have a cookie! Or whatever it is that will keep you going.
- Create a food plan: Plan and decide what you're going to do about food ahead of time. If you need to eat out, do it. If you'd rather stock up on freezer and crock-pot meals, do it. Even consider asking for restaurant gift cards for a few holidays, just make sure you have a plan to stay fed and rested so you can operate at the level you need to.
- Trust yourself: I was fortunate to not suffer from Imposter Syndrome for most of my time in graduate school. However, that all changed the minute I set a defense date. Take ownership of your accomplishments and trust that the same work ethic that got you to your defense will carry you through it.
- I do not work on my thesis during my lunchtime: My breaks and lunch at work are used for breaks and lunch. I do not venture into the work of my dissertation during this time. Doing so can dangerously push me in the direction of burnout. I allow break times to be occasions when I unwind for a moment and think about the other parts of my life that matter outside of school and work.

- Sacrificing at least one *entire* day of my weekend each week has become a necessity: Choose either Saturday or Sunday as the day that you will commit totally to working on your dissertation. On this day, you will rise early in the morning, go to your designated writing spot or the site where you will conduct research, and focus on your work. I typically choose Saturday as the day that I commit 5+ hours to working on my dissertation. This time can be managed in any way that is comfortable for you, but you must be productive and gain ground on your writing or research.
- Do not pull all-nighters: I know this sounds odd, considering how compressed the perceived available time to work on my dissertation may be, but it is a very beneficial and crucial tip. I set a hard time at night in which I will find myself lying in bed regardless of what I have or have not accomplished that day.
- Meditation. We ended each class meeting with 5 minutes of meditation to help us prepare for and focus on our writing tasks that followed. This was a great way to clear my head and let go of the rest of the day and just focus on my main priority—writing. I echo several GradHackers who have shared the benefits of meditation and mindfulness-based stress reduction in grad school.
- Intentions journal. After meditating, we wrote down specific intentions and goals to visualize what we were going to accomplish that day. Similar to making checklists, which I enjoy, this exercise helped me to feel organized and motivated to check off that goal on my list of intentions for the day.

#### Additional Resources

1. Overcome writer's block with helpful strategies and advice.
  - Why Aren't We Writing?
  - Thinker's Block: Play Your Way out of a Dissertation Rut
  - Pushing Past Writing Blocks
2. Fight procrastination with a solid plan.
  - Create SMART Writing Plans
  - Dissertating While Working
  - Support Your Writing Productivity and Leave Binge-Writing Behind
  - Wrap up Your Dissertation with a Writing Plan
  - How to Develop a Strategic Writing Plan
  - Strategies to Maintain Focus while Writing Your Dissertation
  - "Writer," "Draft," "Finishing": Words to Dissertate By
  - How to Write Like an Olympian
  - Write, Damn it
  - Scheduling Summer Writing
  - Dissertating in the Summer
3. Battle disorganization and distraction with a new piece of software.
  - The Best Software for Writing Your Dissertation
  - Adapting Your Writing Software to Your Writing Style
  - Stripping Down the Writing Process
  - Distraction-Free Writing Tools

- Even More Distraction-Free Writing Tools
4. Conquer discouragement with inspiration from other authors.
    - 4 Quick Tips for Better Writing in Any Discipline
    - Three Books that Changed My Dissertation
    - Writing Inspiration for Productivity
    - Finding Joy in Writing
  5. Fight loneliness with a writing group.
    - Writing Boot Camps
    - DIY Writing Groups
    - Making a Writing Group That Works

#### Ebooks

- The A-Z of the PhD Trajectory <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2F978-3-319-77425-1.pdf>
- Writing a Graduate Dissertation or Thesis <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2F978-94-6300-426-8.pdf>
- The Doctoral Student's Advisor & Mentor: Sage Advice from the Experts <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/up/reader.action?docID=616364>