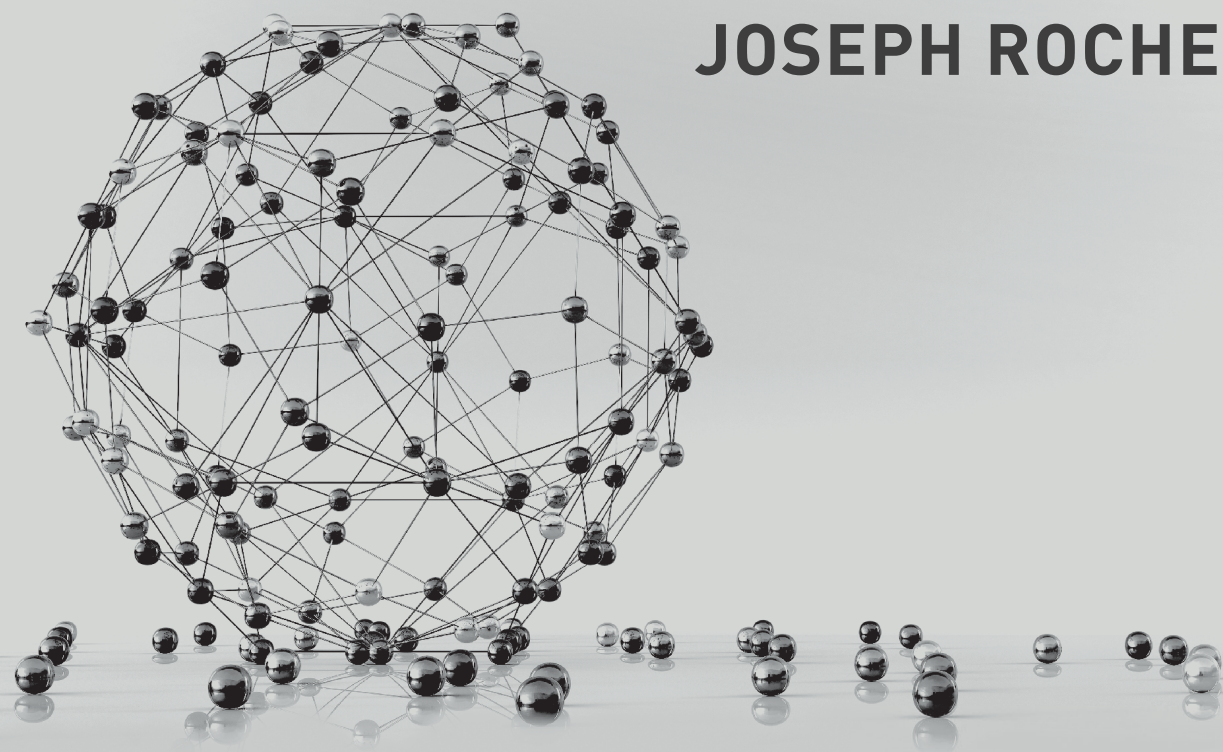


ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR  
**EARLY CAREER  
RESEARCHERS**

**JOSEPH ROCHE**



 **SAGE**

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
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# Three **Writing**

In this chapter, we will cover:

- developing writing skills
  - tracking productivity and maintaining motivation
  - outlining and structuring writing tasks
  - drafting, editing, and the iterative writing process
  - writing groups and the value of feedback.
- 

## Academic writing

You are a writer. The sooner you recognise that and either make peace with it, or – ideally – embrace it, the better. As an academic researcher, your role is not solely to gather and analyse data, but also to contribute to new knowledge by sharing your ideas and findings. Although sharing that work might include teaching, public speaking, social media, and other forms of communication (see Chapter 6 for teaching and Chapter 8 for communication and engagement), your main mode of communication will always be your writing. You might not yet think of yourself as a writer. You might know for a fact that your writing is abysmal. That is no excuse. If you take your job seriously, and you care about contributing to your field of research, and maybe even plan on making it your career, then you have a duty to improve your writing. That might sound daunting, but the good news (and the disappointing news, if you think about it too deeply) is that the bar is set dismally low – most academic writing is awful. If you make the conscious decision to become a more productive, more efficient, and more engaging writer, you will quickly rise above the status quo.

The scope of academic writing may appear vast, but the requisite skills to be a prolific writer are uncomplicated. As academic researchers we must practise our craft and do that we need to set a writing schedule. The only difficult step is sticking to that schedule. This chapter will address the need to practise writing and embrace the different stages of the writing process to fully realise our potential as academic writers.

## Reading about writing

The first step in becoming more committed to our writing is to become more committed to our reading. Reading about writing can be cathartic and stimulating. Reading about how other people approach the writing process feels like we are getting to look behind the curtain at how the magic happens, and it can be the motivation that many of us need to get started.

If reading is one of your hobbies, then you have conveniently already committed to improving your writing. The next time you are reading – be it a news article, a textbook, or a medieval fantasy novel – pay close attention to what you like about what you are reading. How does the writing capture your attention? How are the sentences and paragraphs constructed in ways that make them effortless to read? Or if you are struggling to connect with a piece of writing, then what is it about the writing that is off-putting? Recognising styles of writing that appeal to you will help you develop your own writing. Maybe you will not write your next academic paper in the style of a medieval fantasy, but the basic principle of forming word patterns that people will enjoy reading holds true whether it is academic writing, broadsheet journalism, or post-apocalyptic erotic cyberpunk.

If reading is not already a hobby of yours, but you are determined to improve your writing, a good place to start is a short text by the psychology professor Paul Silvia – *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing* (2007). It is an uncompromising and brutally effective guide to help researchers be more productive writers. A complementary companion to that book is *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write* by higher education professor Helen Sword (2017). It delves into the social and emotional aspects of writing as well as including personal perspectives on writing from academics around the world. Once we recognise ourselves as writers, we need not limit our learning solely to academic writing (Antoniou and Moriarty, 2008). There are countless books about the general craft of writing, and any that can motivate us to write are invaluable. For your perusal and your motivation, there is a list of books, blogs, and other writing resources on this book's companion website.

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### Researcher views

Julian, on how his relationship with academic writing affected him:

Academic writing played a huge role in my research adventure. Not due to a fondness or talent for it, but due to my own perceived ineptitude for it. A combination of perfectionism, coupled with a lack of belief in what I am trying to complete, along with some bad timing, resulted in me disembarking from my research journey ... or at least, having a long layover.

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Some people become addicted to self-help books and reassure themselves that as long as they are reading about self-improvement, they are taking positive action. A better approach is for us to practise our writing while reading about ways to improve it. One piece of advice that crops up in every book about writing is that to improve our writing we must practise, and to practise we must write as often as possible. Reading, too, should be part of that practice. The author Stephen King knows what it means to be a prolific writer, having published more than 60 novels, so his advice deserves our

attention: 'If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut' (King, 2000, p. 164).

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### Researcher views

Isabel, on reading Stephen King's book *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*:

Oh I read that book too! Someone in my lab had a copy of it and said it would help me get better at writing. Yes, it's crazy. It has lots of tips and stuff. But like the cocaine stories too ... And then you're in a car crash! Ha! It was wild. Not what I was expecting. But it did make me think a lot more about how I write. I guess that's the point.

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## The simplest most difficult task

We need to write more, and we need to publish more. That maxim holds true for almost every academic researcher, especially those at an early stage in their careers. If you are the exception – the mythical, early career academic who is already writing and publishing prodigiously with ease – then you must find a way to maintain that level of output and continue to be a magical unicorn academic for as long as you can before you are inevitably dragged back down to the realm of human struggles alongside the rest of us. If you do not enjoy the writing process yet, then you are not alone (Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018). Even the best academics struggle with their writing and, for most, it is a constant issue. It can range from mild frustration at never quite reaching writing goals, to being the root cause of feelings of anxiety, inferiority, and dread (Cameron et al., 2009; Huerta et al., 2017; French, 2018a). Doctoral and graduate students are generally worried about their writing, and it can be the reason some choose a different career path (Thomson and Kamler, 2016; French, 2018b). We are judged on our writing (Blaxter et al., 1998; Backes-Gellner and Schlinghoff, 2010; Aprile et al., 2020). Paradoxically, we are judged not on the style, the tone, or even the quality of our writing, or at least not as much as one might think. We are judged – crudely – on whether it exists or it does not.

It is one of our enduring obligations as researchers to make sure our writing output exists. We will likely need to work on our writing, as regularly as possible, for the rest of our careers. Writing is the one academic skill that cannot be carried by the other skills in our repertoire. If we find a way to enjoy it, it will become easier, but still there will be times when it is not easy and there will be days when we do not want to write. These are the days when it is most important that we do. The bad days will likely outnumber the good days, and we do not have the luxury of waiting until we feel motivated to write. Making a writing schedule and sticking to it rigidly is the single, non-negotiable, open secret to being a more productive academic writer.

The way to stick to a writing schedule is to make sure nothing else impinges on the writing time we have scheduled for ourselves. Paul Silvia mercilessly dismantles all of the excuses (or ‘specious barriers’ as he labels them) we create for not sticking to our writing schedules: not having enough time, not having enough research done, not feeling inspired, or not having the right equipment – ‘Equipment will never help you write a lot; only making a schedule and sticking to it will make you a productive writer’ (Silvia, 2007, p. 22).

While Paul Silvia suggests that academic writing can be a ‘grim business’ (Silvia, 2007, p. 47), Helen Sword believes we should be cognisant of our emotions, our passion for the craft of writing, and be open to adding ‘pleasure and playfulness’ to our writing (Sword, 2017, p. 206). Both perspectives are true: writing is something to be enjoyed – even if just for the pleasure of creating something tangible that can be shared with others – but the *grim business* is showing up every day to commit words to paper, even when we don’t feel like it. That is the skill that will define our academic writing and, if we can master it, will make our academic life immeasurably more gratifying. If, at this point, you have not already started thinking about your writing schedule, then to echo Paul Silvia’s sentiment: ‘This book cannot help you unless you accept the principle of scheduling, because the only way to write a lot is to write regularly, regardless of whether you feel like writing’ (Silvia, 2007, pp. 27–28).

Ruthlessly protect your writing time. The longer you spend working as an academic researcher, the more tasks and responsibilities that will mysteriously and surreptitiously become part of your job. There is usually less immediate pressure to write, and it can be easier to spend our time replying to emails, scheduling meetings, preparing to teach classes, or doing any of the countless tasks that can quickly fill the day of an academic researcher (Grant and Knowles, 2000). The literary scholar Lisa SurrIDGE rails against this phenomenon by strategically procrastinating on her teaching preparation to prioritise academic writing: ‘I play chicken with my classes – because it’s easy to let your research go during term time, but you know you won’t walk into a class under-prepared’ (Sword, 2017, p. 186). In Chapter 6, we will address managing teaching schedules, but Lisa SurrIDGE’s commitment to prioritising academic writing is admirable. If even teaching – what many of us see as our most direct and powerful way to help others fulfil their potential – can occasionally be a lower priority than academic writing, then clearly nothing can be higher.

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### Researcher views

Celeste, on finding motivation to write:

It was a big problem for me. I don’t enjoy writing. So for me to sit down and actually write, I tend to find that difficult. Unless someone put me under pressure and told me this is the deadline, you need to have it done by then, I wouldn’t do it, to be honest.

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## Write every day

One of the great teachers of writing, William Zinsser, insists that we practise writing every day: ‘You learn to write by writing. It’s a truism, but what makes it a truism is that it’s true. The only way to learn to write is to force yourself to produce a certain number of words on a regular basis’ (1976, p. 49). Set yourself an amount of time to write and the number of words that you would like to reach each day. Thirty minutes should be the minimum and two hours is as much as anyone needs if they are writing every day. If you write 300–500 words every day, you will not only feel smugly productive, but you will also be writing more than the vast majority of your peers.

Write for short periods each day rather than waiting for that fabled perfect time to write (Bolker, 1998). Those spells that appear blissfully free on our calendars – the weekend, the semester break, the holidays – are mirages. By the time we reach those shimmering oases of calm we will have just as many excuses for not writing as we do now. The insistence that we will do our writing in intense periods of ‘binge writing’ (Kellogg, 1999), when we finally have time to *really* focus on it, is a myth that many of us tell ourselves early (and sometimes much later) in our careers. We need to be honest with ourselves about how much we are actually writing and, as with a lot of the skills in this book, the only way to do that is to monitor our progress.

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### Researcher views

Carolina, on only being able to focus on academic writing when there was no one else around:

I had to wait for everyone to leave the office before I could write. Even the tiniest distraction during the day and I would do anything else other than writing. But as soon as everyone went home it was like the elves and the shoemaker. And a few hours later I would have written a few thousand words. I was the elves, obviously.

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The psychology professor Robert Boice has long advocated for improving academic writing through having a schedule and monitoring progress (Boice, 1990). As researchers, if we are unhappy with our writing output, we already have all the tools we need to address the problem. We can experiment, gather data, and look for patterns. Most of us think we are writing more than we are until we start tracking the days we write, the time we spend writing, and the number of words we have written. It can be startling to see how low those numbers are when we first confront them, but once we do, we have established a baseline, as well as all the motivation we need to set about trying to improve them. By continuously monitoring our writing habits we can explore every facet of our relationship with writing and easily gather data to explain fluctuations in our productivity (Craswell and Poore, 2012). What time of the day is most productive

for writing? Where is the best location to write? Which days of the week are the most challenging when it comes to accommodating writing time? Helen Sword has demonstrated that the writing practices of prolific academic writers are incredibly varied and the ‘write every day!’ mantra may not work for everyone (Sword, 2016, p. 312). Each of us needs to reflect on our own writing habits, address the factors that are affecting our writing, and start sticking to our writing schedule.

There is a template spreadsheet available on this book’s companion website that I use to doggedly record the days when I write, how much time I spend writing, the number of words I write, and the writing tasks I am working on. This spreadsheet is modelled on Paul Silvia’s version (Silvia, 2007) which was instrumental in dramatically increasing my academic writing output. Within five years I went from having virtually no writing output to having the most peer-reviewed publications in my department during that time. There are mitigating factors that make that less impressive than it sounds – I became the most prolific academic writer in my department only because my colleagues who were out-publishing me over that period both left to take up more senior (and more lucrative) positions in other universities. They are outstanding researchers, but it is no coincidence that the most prolific academic writers were considered the top candidates for prestigious senior academic positions. Keep that in mind for when we consider career progression in Chapter 11.

## A first draft and an ever-improving outline

For many researchers, the most arduous part of academic writing is making a start. A blank page or screen staring back at us can be paralysing, but luckily, we can protect ourselves by relying on the power of *drafting*. All we really need to begin writing is a cursory outline to help guide us in our main objective – producing a *truly underwhelming* first draft. Managing our expectations is key at this stage and we should not be disappointed by feeble first efforts. Most of us cannot produce engaging prose on command (or, as the first draft of this sentence read: ‘We are not great at writing good words when we want to.’ Yikes). You only need your first draft to bring you to your second draft (and the third, and so on, through as many drafts as are needed) so that the iterative process of writing can improve your work every time.

If you are really embarrassed by your first draft, then no one needs to see it, and you can improve it until it is ready to share. You can still call it your ‘first draft’ when you do eventually share it and no one will ever know that it took you five iterations just to reach that point. Even the best writers in the world force themselves to get their first draft down on paper so they can see how much work it needs. The novelist Anne Lamott pointedly refers to them as ‘shitty first drafts’ and taps into the uncertainty we all face when she says: ‘Very few writers really know what they are doing until they’ve done it’ (Lamott, 1994, p. 50).



We choose what we classify as academic writing. It could be a research grant application, a policy briefing, a report on an experiment, an abstract for a conference presentation, a course syllabus, or simply writing up our research progress, as suggested in Chapter 2. If you are really brave, you could start writing with no idea of what you are going to write about or where it is going, but most of us need to have an idea and an outline. In Chapter 4, we will look at the different kinds of publications you might consider, but a good place to start is an academic paper. The academic paper is the staple currency of academic writing. It is also a rudimentary indicator of academic development and so it is never too early to start writing that first paper. If there are no external factors influencing the development of the paper – such as supervisors, co-authors, or funders – then you have the freedom to explore your ideas. If you do not have an idea for a paper, you could write about some of the aspects of research mentioned in Chapter 2: your research philosophy, your research methods, or a review of your research topic.

It can be tempting to start by diving straight into writing the first section of the paper but having a well-considered and coherent outline is paramount. A paper, like most things we write, is essentially a narrative and should have some form of beginning, middle, and end. Lay out your outline using working titles of the main sections. Most papers need an introduction, some background details or context, a methods section, results, some discussion, and conclusions. Expand the outline by planning how each of those sections could comprise several subsections, and estimate word counts for each subsection. This has the twofold advantage of, firstly, giving you a sense of the overall length of the paper and, secondly, dividing the paper into more manageable units of required writing.

Having an outline that effectively serves as the *Table of Contents* of your paper lets you pick and choose which subsections to work on with the confidence that they will fit into the larger structure. The outline of your paper (or report, or book chapter, or any other writing assignment) is a guide, but it is not set in stone, and you are not beholden to it. As you draft the different sections and subsections, you may find you need to move, add, or remove sections. You may have overestimated or underestimated the word count you predicted for some sections, and they may need to be merged or split accordingly. Changing and updating your outline is normal and helps you to maintain an overview of the paper. The drafting stage is where you can experiment, make mistakes, and entertain all your creative ideas.

When you start your allocated writing time each day, choose a section or subsection of the paper and begin freewriting: writing your thoughts as they come to you (Elbow, 1998; Li, 2007). The academic journal editor Roger Watson maintains that we cannot draft and edit at the same time and advises getting the words written in any way we can, before fixing them at the editing stage: 'If you are writing and can't think of the right word (e.g. for elephant) don't worry – write (big animal long nose) and move on – come back later and get the correct term. Write, don't edit; otherwise you lose

flow' (Watson, 2015). Getting into a creative flow with our writing is something that freewriting can stimulate but for many academic researchers, especially in the early stages of developing writing skills, that state of flow may not arrive.

One of the most famous ways to ensure productive writing spurts without depending on creative flows is through the pomodoro technique, which involves using a kitchen timer (which may or may not happen to be shaped like a tomato/pomodoro) to measure 25-minute intervals of writing time (Cirillo, 2018). If you find yourself in creative flow, you might write for two hours, barely noticing the passage of time. What is more likely is that you might have to motivate yourself to write for 25 minutes by promising yourself the reward of a short five-minute break to stand up, stretch your legs, and forage for snacks before starting the next pomodoro. It takes discipline to keep to those five-minute breaks, so emails, messages, or other distractions should be postponed until the end of the allotted writing period.

At the beginning of your quest to be a more prolific writer, do not worry unduly about the inherent quality or value of what you are writing – there will be plenty of time to think about that during the editing process. What is most important at the drafting stage is fiercely guarding your writing time and cultivating the discipline to write regardless of your circumstances. Freewriting can be done anywhere, at any time, with a computer, a mobile device, or a pen and paper. Draft chapters of this book were written on the bus with the iPhone Notes app during 30-minute commutes to work.

## Editing

The editing process ensures our work progresses from being just writing to being writing of quality. As William Zinsser reminds us: 'Rewriting is the essence of writing well: it's where the game is won or lost,' and he goes on to point out how difficult that can be to accept: 'We all have an emotional equity in our first draft, we can't believe that it wasn't born perfect. But the odds are close to 100 percent that it wasn't' (Zinsser, 1976, p. 83). Once we begin the editing process, the game really is afoot and we can now add our personality and style, finessing our initial words and polishing them until they shine. Writing scholars Rowena Murray and Sarah Moore describe this iterative nature of writing and how it 'is the manifestation of your professional learning journey and it is (or at least it should be) a continuous process involving reflection, improvement, development, progress and fulfilment of various types and in varying measures' (Murray and Moore, 2006, p. 5).

Unlike the rush of the drafting process, which is often a scramble to get the words on the page as quickly and clumsily as possible, the editing stage is when we can relax and work steadily through each word, sentence, and paragraph – rewriting our text until it starts to form something we can be proud of. There is no need to

solely trust ourselves with this step and we should invite our family, friends, and colleagues to offer their perspectives and to help with proofreading (Huff, 1999; Gray, 2005). As we approach the final draft (or what we hope is the final draft but is, in all likelihood, going to be three drafts away from our final draft) we have no excuse for basic errors persisting in our text. By the time our writing ends up with a journal editor or is sent for peer-review (Chapter 4), readers should be focused on what we are saying, not distracted by the standard of our writing. The author and punctuation advocate Lynne Truss captures how some of us feel when we are sent work to review that still contains basic errors: ‘No matter that you have a PhD and have read all of Henry James twice. If you still persist in writing, “Good food at its best”, you deserve to be struck by lightning, hacked up on the spot and buried in an unmarked grave’ (Truss, 2003, p. 43).

If you feel the need to brush up on the basics of grammar and punctuation, it will prove a worthwhile investment of your time. As well as Lynne Truss’s irreverent take on the correct use of language, the linguist and popular science author Steven Pinker provides a scientific view of writing that serves many writers as their modern-day style guide (Pinker, 2014). A more vintage option is a succinct and invaluable book on the basics of writing by the author E. B. White. Most known for writing hugely popular children’s books, White turned the coursebook of his teacher William Strunk Jr. into the quintessential writer’s guide, *The Elements of Style* (White and Strunk, 1959), which is worthy of inclusion on every writer’s bookshelf.

The distinction between the indulgence of the first draft and the careful refinement required in subsequent drafts is made clear by the prolific author Umberto Eco: ‘write everything that comes into your head, but only in the first draft’ (Eco, 2015, p. 151). That advice comes from an English translation of a book he wrote in the 1970s called *Come si fa una tesi di Laurea* (How to write a thesis) before he shot to fame as an award-winning novelist. It is full of sensible recommendations, such as: ‘You are not Proust. Do not write long sentences. If they come into your head, write them, but then break them down’ (Eco, 2015, p. 147). Making sentences less complicated is likely to be a common recommendation you will hear as you seek to improve your academic writing (Mewburn et al., 2019). Do not be surprised to see your words dramatically cut by editors, and for your writing to be much enhanced as a result. Becoming a better writer involves learning how to apply that ferocity of word-cutting to our own work.

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### Researcher views

Henrietta, on mentoring research students’ academic writing:

It is a tricky thing nowadays to find the line between being honest and giving critical and constructive feedback, but also not hurting their feelings where they go and tell everyone that you’re a terrible person and harsh.

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You can display the full, magnificent, and wondrous range of your vocabulary if your chosen words fit and do not alienate your readers (Smith, 1994). Do not feel obliged to saturate your work with academic jargon just because other academic writers do. As you are editing, keep asking yourself if what you have written can be expressed more clearly, with fewer words or sentences, using simpler language. It is appropriate to leave the final sentiment on editing to William Strunk. The gendered language is indicative of the fact that it was written more than 100 years ago in his original coursebook, long before E. B. White's re-examination of the text, but the advice itself remains undiminished: 'Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell' (White and Strunk, 1959, p. 23).

## Writing groups

Having a writing schedule and monitoring progress will result in most of us seeing an increase in our writing output, but creating an environment where we are held accountable to people other than ourselves is one of the most reliable ways to dramatically escalate writing productivity (Boice, 1990). Writing groups emerged from university literary societies in the eighteenth century (Gere, 1987) and the education scholars Claire Aitchison and Cally Guerin define them as 'situations where more than two people come together to work on their writing in a sustained way, over repeated gatherings, for doing, discussing or sharing their writing for agreed purposes' (Aitchison and Guerin, 2014, p. 7). A writing group can include peers, colleagues, or friends who meet up regularly (in person or online) to work on their writing in a structured but social setting. Writing groups can be supportive environments where we discuss the highs and lows of the writing experience with people who are acutely aware of what we are going through. If you are the type of person who sometimes feels that academic writing can be an isolating or lonely experience, a writing group could have a positive impact on your relationship with writing (Mattsson et al., 2020). For early career academics, the time spent in a writing group is not only precious in terms of writing output, but can have profound benefits for many aspects of their work (Lee and Boud, 2003).

Some writing groups focus on productivity, impose strict rules, and expect members to write for the majority of their time together. This is especially helpful for researchers who are struggling with the golden rule of safeguarding their writing time at all costs. Having scheduled meetings with a writing group can ensure that at least those allocated writing periods will be protected. Other groups spend less time writing and focus more on motivation and support. This format is more akin to a *writers' group* (rather than a *writing group*), where members are expected to write in their own time

and share samples of their work before meetings so that most of the meeting time can be spent providing constructive feedback to each other.

Researchers who assess their peers' writing, provide feedback, and in turn receive feedback from peers on their own writing, find the process to be 'time consuming, intellectually challenging and socially uncomfortable' but also 'effective in improving the quality of their own subsequent written work and developing other transferable skills' (Topping et al., 2000, p. 163). Peer feedback can be particularly daunting for those who are not writing in their first language, but it can be even more valuable (Hyland, 2004; Paltridge and Starfield, 2007). Critiquing others' work in writing groups can be as instructive to our writing skills as receiving critical feedback on our own writing (Saunders, 1989; Aitchison, 2009). Although immersive writing retreats are widely regarded as being one of the most constructive ways to incorporate peer-learning into writing (Moore, 2003; Murray and Newton, 2009), the infrequency of such retreats makes them not as useful for early career researchers who benefit from the regular feedback that comes with writing groups.

Even if your writing group is the kind that puts emphasis on spending as much time as possible writing, taking a few minutes to set out writing goals at the start of each session and to reflect on them at the end is a rewarding exercise. Writing groups can foster a sense of community stemming from a shared love of writing, a shared anxiety about writing, or something in between. Camaraderie naturally grows in spaces of constructive critique and encouragement. If you want to join an academic writing group, you should first check if there are any existing groups you could join within your department or faculty. If you cannot find a group, you may consider establishing your own. There are no definitive rules for setting up a writing group, but Aitchison and Guerin (2014) offer a range of perspectives from different scholars and researchers who have explored the benefits of forming and running academic writing groups and have plenty of advice around the practicalities and potential pitfalls. A sample format and agenda template for setting up and running a writing group is available on this book's companion website.

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### Researcher views

Tessa, on establishing a writing group:

We formed a writing group. That was a really big piece for me. This was like three or four years ago now, and we still keep that up [...] We use a modified version of the pomodoro technique and, at the beginning of every meeting, everyone that is there says just generally what their goals are for the day. And we always make it really clear that it is not for someone to feel judged if they do or don't make those goals. But just for you to think about what is it *I want to do* and *Let me just say it out loud* so at least you know you'll try to hold yourself accountable [...] I don't think I would have finished my dissertation, at least not when I did, without that group and without that process.

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## Summary

- Read habitually. What you are reading does not really matter once you are critiquing it in relation to how you write.
- Keep a schedule and stick to it. This deceptively simple-sounding task is the key to increasing your writing output.
- Write often – every day if you can – and track your output. If there is one self-assessment you cannot afford to hide from in research, it is being honest with yourself about how much and how often you are writing.
- Embrace the iterative process of writing. Initially, it might feel like you are constantly rewriting, but after working through the stages of outlining, drafting, editing, cutting, and proofing, you will start to see the results. Your first draft will not be perfect, but your final draft will sparkle.
- Share your writing and actively seek feedback. Whether it be from friends, loved ones, supervisors, or writing groups – the more opinions you gather on your work, the more your writing will improve.

Writing is such an important academic skill that there is no way for us to ignore it. We must embrace it and develop it until it is a skill we can rely on, or we will struggle with a substantial portion of our work as academic researchers. As mentioned at the start of this chapter, the general calibre of academic writing is not high. Even if our writing ability is poor by every reliable measure we can think of, if we follow the suggestions in this chapter and commit to improving, we can easily reach and surpass the quality of standard academic writing. We might even find ourselves enjoying writing, and if that happens, we are well on our way to becoming distinguished academic researchers. Next, we need to decide what we are going to write and what to do with it once it is written. Set a course for Chapter 4, where we will explore the murky depths of academic publishing.

## Further reading

- Aitchison, C. & Guerin, C. (Eds.) (2014). *Writing Groups for Doctoral Education and Beyond: Innovations in Practice and Theory*. London, UK: Routledge.

An edited collection of perspectives on writing groups written by scholars who recognise the value that writing groups can bring to early career researchers.

- Boice, R. (1990). *Professors as Writers: A Self-help Guide to Productive Writing*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.

This book highlights the importance of keeping a writing schedule and being honest with ourselves and others about our writing output. It is a key reference of many other academic writing books, including most of the books on this list.

- Murray, R. (2002). *How to Write a Thesis*. Berkshire, UK: McGraw-Hill Education.

Rowena Murray is one of the most trusted voices on this topic. If you are looking for a quaint but wonderfully impudent take on the process, see Umberto Eco's book of the same name.

- Silvia, P. J. (2007). *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

This book is succinct and takes no prisoners. It is often described by early career researchers as the book that has had the biggest impact on their writing.

- Sword, H. (2017). *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

A thoughtful and considered examination of academic writing packed with perspectives from exemplary academic writers.

## Resources

Further resources for this chapter can be found at: [www.JosephRoche.ie/EssentialSkills](http://www.JosephRoche.ie/EssentialSkills)

- List of Writing Resources
- Writing Tracking Spreadsheet Template
- Writing Group Format and Agenda Template

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