



How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing

Paul J. Silvia

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All students and professors need to write, and many struggle to finish their stalled dissertations, journal articles, book chapters, or grant proposals. Writing is hard work and can be difficult to wedge into a frenetic academic schedule. In this practical, light-hearted, and encouraging book, Paul Silvia explains that writing productively does not require innate skills or special traits but specific tactics and actions. Drawing examples from his own field of psychology, he shows readers how to overcome motivational roadblocks and become prolific without sacrificing evenings, weekends, and vacations. After describing strategies for writing productively, the author gives detailed advice from the trenches on how to write, submit, revise, and resubmit articles, how to improve writing quality, and how to write and publish academic work.

How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing Details

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From Reader Review How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing for online ebook

Aliyu says

Informative, blunt and funny at once, it's been an awesome read for me as I attempt to start writing. Highly recommend it for any type of writing upstart!

Alyssa Chrisman says

Concise, motivating read with useful advice. I am a PhD student in my second semester and am planning on implementing Silvia's strategies. I was feeling overwhelmed with the amount of writing projects I am working on, but I now I feel like I have a system for attacking them that will still allow me to enjoy my free time.

Andy says

I read this years ago and it helped. I loaned it to someone and didn't get it back. I find myself now with a lot to write, so I bought a new copy and read it over. The refresher was worthwhile and has already helped me to get back on track. I appreciate the author's humor--including the New Yorker cartoons--as well as his brevity.

Amity says

Though Silva writes for an audience outside of my discipline, I think his advice is much needed if not always easy to hear and put into practice. I have often blamed my lack of finished product on an intense and persistent case of writer's block while failing to schedule writing time. I see the folly of my ways.

Mehwish Zuberi says

I read this book in search for inspiration (read: material for procrastination) as I write my master thesis. The author has a snarky tone, which I enjoyed thoroughly and it spoke directly to me. Though the book is more oriented towards journals and books, there is something in it for anyone who is - or attempting to - write academically in any capacity. Some lessons to share (and to remind myself):

- There is no such thing as 'writer's block' in academic writing.
- Only a fool rewards bouts of productive writing with skipping scheduled writing periods (its me, I'm the fool).
- Inspiration is a product of writing, not the other way around.
- For goodness' sake, use dashes!

This book made me write my first Goodreads' review, so I guess that's saying something to its effectiveness.

Shawn says

For a book that tells you the "secret" to writing a lot in the second chapter, it actually has a lot more to offer. I especially found the chapters on writing articles and the chapter on writing books to be especially helpful. In the end, I found myself quite motivated to sit down and start writing. This is useful as I prepare for my doctoral exams.

Katrina says

I wish I'd read this when I was in graduate school. I plan to give copies to my advisees. I like the simplicity of Silvia's advice, and the practical examples he gives from his own work (e.g. sample spreadsheets for tracking projects). Includes good advice on scheduling, making big and small goals, prioritizing, starting a writing group, writing journal articles, and writing books. I skipped the chapter on style because that's not what I was looking for.

Vanessa Fuller says

A colleague / friend with whom I've been working the last year recently mentioned this little gem of a book to me as we discussed some rather disappointing peer reviews she'd received.

Academic writing is hard work, often leaving writers / authors rather dispirited and unmotivated. Finding motivation to write at all remains a constant battle for many of us. And, time and again, I find myself saying to students, colleagues and myself, 'just schedule time to write and **only write** if you want to accomplish anything'.

More than anything, that message rings out loud and clear throughout this precious little bit of encouragement by Paul Silvia.

I genuinely love this book. Its tone. Its thinness. Its simplicity. Its language. And, its messages, both primary and supporting. Whether student or mentor, writing an article or book manuscript or proposal, whether just beginning or seeking to finish items on your to-do list, this book offers something for everyone.

In the week since it arrived, I've gone from planning to read a chapter at a time to plowing through it as if it is the most exciting suspense novel ever. It's just that engaging. And, I will be recommending, if not demanding, that all of my students give it a read regardless of where they live within the graduate school landscape.

Thank you, Paul Silvia. I'll be revisiting my own writing schedule this weekend. And, recommitting to ~~cleaning my desk~~ procrastinating less.

Hilary says

What a fantastic book. Top-notch advice for academic (or even non-academic) writers. Very motivating. I wish I had found this earlier in grad school!

Favorite Quotes:

"The only thing that a writer's room needs, according to Stephen King (2000), is "a door which you are willing to shut" (p. 155)."

"Writing usurps time that should be spent on important leisure activities like spending time with friends and family, making lentil soup, or knitting the dog a Santa hat."

"I call these specious barriers: At first they appear to be legitimate reasons for not writing, but they crumble under critical scrutiny."

"‘I can’t find time to write,’ also known as ‘I would write more if I could just find big blocks of time.’ This specious barrier is destined for academia’s hall of fame."

"When people endorse this specious barrier, I imagine them roaming through their schedules like naturalists in search of Time To Write, that most elusive and secretive of creatures."

"Instead of finding time to write, allot time to write. Prolific writers make a schedule and stick to it."

"When confronted with their fruitless ways, binge writers often proffer a self-defeating dispositional attribution: "I'm just not the kind of person who's good at making a schedule and sticking to it." This is nonsense, of course. People like dispositional explanations when they don't want to change (Jellison, 1993)."

"If you don't plan to make a schedule, gently close this book, clean it so it looks brand new, and give it as a gift to a friend who wants to be a better writer."

"Some academics are so enamored of goals, initiatives, and strategic plans that they become deans and provosts."

"Research on self-regulation shows that it isn't enough to set a goal and make it a priority: People must monitor their progress toward the goal (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Duval & Silvia, 2001)."

"Reward yourself when you finish a project goal. Self-reinforcement and contingency management are time honored ways of fostering desirable behaviors (Skinner, 1987)."

"Complaining about writing is usually bad, especially when it involves the specious barriers described in chapter 2. When people sit around and talk about what they could accomplish if only they could find time to write or get a new computer, they're colluding to maintain their useless, wasteful, binge-writing habits."

"Psychologists like writing about the existing literature. Is there a nonexistent literature that I should be reading and referencing?"

"The abomination persons should remain the property of small-town sheriffs on the hunt for "a person or

persons unknown.””

“Delete very, quite, basically, actually, virtually, extremely, remarkably, completely, at all, and so forth. Basically, these quite useless words add virtually nothing at all; like weeds, they’ll in fact actually smother your sentences completely. In *Junk English*, Ken Smith (2001) called these words parasitic intensifiers.”

“If attitudes are emotional in nature, what are they like in captivity? Will they reproduce like captive pandas?”

“Revising while you generate text is like drinking decaffeinated coffee in the early morning: noble idea, wrong time.”

“Writing a journal article combines all the elements that deter motivation: The probability of success is low; the likelihood of criticism and rejection is high; and the outcome, even if successful, isn’t always rewarding.”

“Writing a journal article is like writing a screenplay for a romantic comedy: You need to learn a formula.”

“An inner audience—an image of who will read your paper—will help you with your writing decisions.”

“Sometimes, closed-door rejections encourage you to submit your manuscript elsewhere; other times, the editor mails you a personal shredder for destroying all known copies of the manuscript.”

“Good resubmission letters will make you look like a serious scholar—because you are. People who deal constructively with criticism deserve to be published.”

“A classic theory of achievement motivation proposed two motives that affect performance: a need to achieve success and a need to avoid failure (Atkinson, 1964).”

“You’ll write better when you expect rejection, because you’ll mute the need to avoid failure.”

“To write a lot, you should rethink your mental models of rejection and publication. Rejections are like a sales tax on publications: The more papers you publish, the more rejections you receive. Following the tips in this book will make you the most rejected writer in your department.”

“Instead of writing review articles, people who don’t outline should drive to the local animal shelter and adopt a dog, one that will love them despite their self-defeating and irrational habits.”

“If you’re extrinsically motivated by money, find other reasons to write your textbook, such as a burning interest in sitting in a chair and typing.”

“By now, even the dimmest reader has discerned this book’s simple message: To write a lot, you must make a schedule and stick to it.”

“It’s easy to pick out the book editors in the conference crowd: They’re better dressed than the professors and graduate students, and they’re standing next to big tables containing lots of books.”

Katie says

Caveat: I was pretty grumpy when I read this, and I have had to read more writing self-help books in the last three weeks than I have ever wanted to read. So I may be a bit unfair.

But still, I found this to be a distinctively unhelpful book. Silvia pretty much tells you in the first 20 pages that the key to writing a lot is (wait for it) to make a schedule and write a lot. Fair enough. But this then gets hammered home for an extra 100+ pages, without adding much of substance and without addressing problems with this approach in a helpful way. I mean, he's correct - the only way to write a lot is to write a lot - but his book doesn't offer any helpful guidance to people who have problems with that approach beyond some generally dismissive comments suggesting that these people should just get over themselves. I think he's trying to be lighthearted, but it just comes across as smug.

I also found his chapter on style to be unhelpful, as I am skeptical of any writing advice that hinges on the increased use of semicolons.

Izham says

This book is great! I learn a lot just by reading it. I finish reading it only in just one day. Silvia writing and how he puts some quotes of research about writing and psychology related really amaze me. Although my field is more in agriculture, I still find that this book is a practical for any academician to motivate themselves to write anything. I mean anything by articles, journals and thesis papers. To sum it up, it is a great book for academicians to read it.

Ivan says

The basic premise behind Paul Silvia's *How to Write a Lot* is that the only way to getting writing done is by writing. Silvia demystifies the craft of writing and reminds us that there is no magic solution: writers simply sit their behinds down (or stand, for the conscientious who prefer standing desks) and puts words to paper—or screen. “Instead of finding time to write, allot time to write,” Silvia says. “Prolific writers make a schedule and stick to it. It’s that simple” (12). The key is regularity, he adds, not the amount of time spent. Whether one devotes 4 hours per week or daily blocks of time, it is important to set aside that time which slowly accrues and yields dividends of writing output. Additionally, be specific with goals for the day. Rather than “write today,” set yourself the goal of “write at least 200 words today.” Then reward yourself (e.g., a snack, a coffee, etc.).

Some writers believe that every second of the allotted “writing time” must be devoted to writing. However, Silvia encourages writers to use the time for anything that would ultimately contribute to writing. So, for example, if you must do more research, then spend that time digging through articles. If you want to read a book on writing, then read it. In the end, Silvia frees the writer from guilt that besets many a writer. (Thanks to Ryan Vasut for bringing up this point with me in conversation.)

One suggestion Silvia offers is of forming a writing support group for people who want to write “faster and better.” A colleague of Silvia suggested “agraphia,” the term for the pathologic loss of the ability to write (51). While some writers like to work collaboratively, others prefer to be secluded from the world.

Regardless, to greater or lesser degree all writers should have some network to bounce ideas and receive constructive feedback and input. This year I've joined an online writers' consortium hosted by Jonathan Rogers, author of a recent biography on Flannery O'Connor and a trilogy of children's books (which I highly commend). The desire is to "offer each other encouragement, accountability, advice, and —hopefully—a growing conviction that the long journey of the writer is worth the effort." If interested, consider joining yourself! <http://www.jonathan-rogers.com/blog/p...>

Silvia also has a brief section on style. He bemoans the poor writing that infects much of academic writing—academese that is stuffy, impenetrable, and unenjoyable. Silvia encourages writers to choose good words. He writes, "The English language has a lot of words, and many of them are short, expressive, and familiar—write with these words" (61). And Silvia encourages the writer to write first and then revise. Many writers needlessly squander time and mental energy in analyzing each sentence as they write. This often derails the thought progression. "Revising while you generate text is like drinking decaffeinated coffee in the early morning: noble idea, wrong time" (76). Instead of a desire to turn each sentence into a masterpiece, unleash your fingers on the keyboard and freely write. "Your first drafts should sound like they were hastily translated from Icelandic by a nonnative speaker" (76).

There are many more takeaways from this book. It is a quick read and I commend to all who want to write a lot.

Anna Nesterovich says

I liked this book. It's short and to the point. And right now I'm writing a very short review on a book about writing a lot :) Without further ado, I'm proceeding to actually writing a lot. My first scheduled session is in 10 minutes. Maybe I'll come back here in a year or so and add something on how much it actually helped.

Tabea says

Let's put it like this: I read the first chapter and the next day wrote 800 words. Then 450, then 815. not good words, but I am writing. that alone is worth 10 stars to me.

Edit 09/2017: I have successfully defended my PhD thesis and submitted the final version after 3 years (first version for examiners 2.5 years). It wasn't this book alone, but it definitely made a big difference and helped kick off the development of better habits.

Jerzy says

Just set a writing schedule and stick to it. It's obvious advice, but if you don't do it yet, it's worth reading the author's cheery tone for a motivational kick in the pants to get you started.

The concepts of 'binge writing' (Kellogg, 1994, *The Psychology of Writing*) and 'dispositional attribution' (Jellison, 1993, *Overcoming Resistance: A Practical Guide to Producing Change in the Workplace*) seem

particularly useful. It's good to have terms for habits that I vaguely knew I had but didn't have names for.

Some favorite parts:

* p.12: 'Do you need to "find time to teach"? Of course not---you have a teaching schedule, and you never miss it. [...] *Finding time* is a destructive way of thinking about writing. Never say this again. Instead of *finding* time to write, *allot* time to write.'

* p.14: 'When confronted with their fruitless ways, binge writers often proffer a self-defeating dispositional attribution: "I'm just not the kind of person who's good at making a schedule and sticking to it." This is nonsense, of course. People like dispositional explanations when they don't want to change [...]'

* p.44: 'Never reward writing with not writing. Rewarding writing by abandoning your schedule is like rewarding yourself for quitting smoking by having a cigarette.'

* p.81-90: Good advice on outlining and writing a journal article, particularly the introduction: 'This formula introduces the reader to your problem (section 1), reviews theories and research relevant to the problem (section 2), and clearly states how your research will solve the problem (section 3).'
