

Random Thoughts . . .

HOW TO WRITE ANYTHING

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I write when I'm inspired, and I see to it that I'm inspired at nine o'clock every morning.

(Peter De Vries)

Here's the situation. You're working on a big writing project—a proposal, paper, book, dissertation, whatever—and in the last five weeks all you've managed to get done is one measly paragraph. You're long past the date when the project was supposed to be finished, and you just looked at your to-do list and reminded yourself that this is only one of several writing projects on your plate and you haven't even started most of the others.

If you're frequently in that situation (and we've never met a faculty member who isn't) we've got a remedy for you. First, though, let's do some truth in advertising. Lots of books and articles have been written about how to write clear and persuasive papers, proposals, dissertations, lab reports, technical memos, love letters, and practically everything else you might ever need to write. We're not going to talk about that stuff: you're on your own when it comes to anything having to do with writing quality. All we're going to try to do here is help you get a complete draft in a reasonable period of time, because that usually turns out to be the make-or-break step in big writing projects. Unless you're a pathological perfectionist (which can be a crippling obstacle to ever finishing anything), once you've got a draft, there's an excellent chance that a finished document suitable for public consumption won't be far behind.

We have two suggestions for getting a major document written in this lifetime: (1) commit to working on it regularly, and (2) keep the creating and editing functions separate.*

- **Dedicate short and frequent periods of time to your major writing projects**

* We didn't invent either technique—you can find variations of both in many references on writing. A particularly good one is Robert Boice, *Professors as Writers, Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press, 1990.*

See if this little monologue sounds familiar. *"I don't have time to work on the proposal now—I've got to get Wednesday's lecture ready and there's a ton of e-mail to answer and I've got to pick the kids up after school tomorrow . . . BUT, as soon as fall break (or Christmas, or summer, or my sabbatical) comes, I'll get to it."*

It's natural to give top priority to the tasks that can be done quickly or are due soon, whether they're important (preparing Wednesday's lecture) or not (answering most e-mails), and so the longer-range projects keep getting put off as the weeks and months and years go by. If a major project has a firm due date, you panic when it approaches and quickly knock some-

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thing out well below the best you can do. If it's a proposal or paper, subsequent rejection should not come as a surprise. If there is no firm due date, the project simply never gets done: the book you've been working on for the last 10 years never gets into print, or your graduate students leave school with their research completed but without their Ph.D.s because they never finished their dissertations.

The strategy of waiting for large blocks of time to work on major writing projects has two significant flaws. When you finally get to a block, it's been so long since the last one that it can take hours or days to build momentum again and you're likely to run out of time before much gets written. Also, as soon as the block arrives other things rush in to fill it, such as your family, whom you've been neglecting for months and who now legitimately think it's their turn.

A much more effective strategy is to *make a commitment to regularly devote short periods of time to major writing projects*. Thirty minutes a day is plenty, or maybe an hour three times a week. One approach is to designate a fixed time period on specified days, preferably at a time of day when you're at your peak, during which you close your door, ignore your phone, and do nothing but work on the project. Alternatively, you might take a few 10–15 minute breaks during the day—times when you would ordinarily check your e-mail or surf the Web or play Sudoku—and use them to work on the project instead. Either way, when you start to write you'll quickly remember where you left off last time and jump in with little wasted motion. When you've put in your budgeted time for the day, you can (and generally should) stop and go back to the rest of your life.

These short writing interludes won't make much difference in how many fires you put out each day, but you'll be astounded when you look back after a week or two and see how much you've gotten done on the project—and when a larger block of time opens up, you'll be able to use it effectively with very little warm-up. You can then be confident of finishing the project in a reasonable time . . . provided that you also take our next suggestion.

• **Do your creating and editing sequentially, not simultaneously**

Here's another common scenario that might ring a bell. *You sit down to write something and come up with the first sentence. You look at it, change some words, add a phrase, rewrite it three or four times, put in a comma here, take one out there . . . and beat on the sentence for five minutes and finally get it where you want it. Then you draft the second sentence, and the first one is instantly obsolete and you have to rewrite it again . . . and you work on those two sentences*

until you're satisfied with them and go on to Sentence 3 and repeat the process . . . and an hour or two later you may have a paragraph to show for your efforts.

If that sounds like your process, it's little wonder that you can't seem to get those large writing projects finished. When you spend hours on every paragraph, the 25-page proposal or 350-page dissertation can take forever, and you're likely to become frustrated and quit before you're even close to a first draft.

At this point you're ready for our second tip, which is to *keep the creating and editing processes separate*. The routine we just described does the opposite: Even before you complete a sentence you start criticizing and trying to fix it. Instead of doing that, write whatever comes into your head, without looking back. If you have trouble getting a session started, write *anything*—random words, if necessary—and after a minute or two things will start flowing. If you like working from outlines, start with an outline; if the project is not huge like a book or dissertation and you don't like outlines, just plunge in. If you're not sure how to begin a project, start with a middle section you can write easily and go back and fill in the introduction later.

Throughout this process you will, of course, hear the usual voice in your head telling you that what you're writing is pure garbage—sloppy, confusing, trivial, etc. Ignore it! Write the first paragraph, then the next, and keep going until you get as much written as your budgeted time allows. Then, when you come back to the project the next day (remember, you committed to it), you can either continue writing or go back and edit what you've already got—and then (and *only* then) is the time to worry about grammar and syntax and style and all that.

Here's what will almost certainly happen if you follow that procedure. The first few sentences you write in a session may indeed be garbage, but the rest will invariably be much better than you thought while you were writing it. You'll crank out a lot of material in a short time, and you'll find that it's much easier and faster to edit it all at once rather than in tiny increments. The bottom line is that you'll find yourself with a completed manuscript in a small fraction of the time it would take with one-sentence-at-a-time editing.

We're not suggesting that working a little on big projects every day is easy. It isn't for most people, and days will inevitably come when the pressure to work only on urgent tasks is overwhelming. When it happens, just do what you have to do without beating yourself up about it and resume your commitment the next day. It may be tough but it's doable, and it works. □

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