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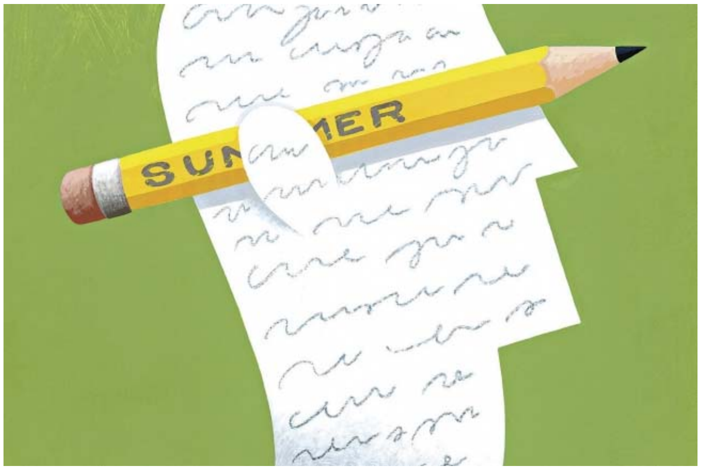
FACULTY

How to Make Time for Research and Writing



Adam Niklewicz for The Chronicle

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Be intentional about writing and make it a part of your daily routine rather than a chore. I tend to do a lot of my writing early in the morning when my family is still asleep. I typically wake up at 4 a.m., grab breakfast, and then get to my computer to begin writing. Some may prefer to write in the evening, at a coffee shop, or at the library. The time and location do not matter as long as writing becomes a part of your daily schedule.

Fawaz Al-Malood is associate dean of business at Mt. San Antonio College.

One of the most important ways to increase your productivity is to know yourself.

How to Build a Productive Summer

Faculty members may plan to get a lot of work done over the break but often fall short of their expectations.

- Making Summer Work ✓ PREMIUM
- How One Professor Avoided Summer Slump ✓ PREMIUM

1. When are you most awake and intellectually sharp? That is the time you want to reserve for research. For some of us it is first thing in the morning, others rev up during the day and 3-6 p.m. is the most productive time, while still others do well in that middle-of-the-night quiet time.

2. What is your comfort level with last-minute activities? If you are fine with doing things at the last minute, that is when you should prepare for class. On the other hand, if the fear of not being prepared would be itself crippling, then that is not a good idea.

Rachel Connelly is a professor of economics at Bowdoin College.

Do your creating and editing sequentially, not simultaneously. The most common approach to writing involves producing a sentence, fiddling with it until it looks OK, going on to the next sentence, revising both sentences because the first one no longer works, and three hours later maybe you've got a paragraph done. If that's how you write, you can bet that the manuscript will either be unfinished by the deadline, pushed out before it's ready, or never finished at all. Instead, just sit down at your computer and free-write, ignoring those voices in your head telling you what trash you're producing. Before long, you'll have a significant body of work that's much better than you thought while you were writing it. Then do the editing and polishing.

Richard M. Felder is a professor emeritus of chemical engineering at North Carolina State University.

All time is not created equal. Having a block of five hours to work on a book is worth more than a dozen half-hour chunks of time throughout the week. I rearrange my schedule to have as many blocks of uninterrupted time as possible. Ideally, I turn off email and my phone.

However, those half-hour chunks of time are not to be squandered either. I make a list of clearly defined shorter tasks that require attention but not major conceptualization, and work on them during "found" time. I usually take my laptop to doctor or dentist appointments to use during waiting periods, and work on these short, defined tasks then.

Shelley Fisher Fishkin is a professor of humanities and English, and director of American studies at Stanford University.

As a single mother on the tenure track, I wrote much of my second book in 20-minute increments defined by the length of *Dora the Explorer* episodes. I kept an outline of topic sentences for each chapter, and if lucky, I could write exactly one paragraph as my daughter delighted in the animated adventure. Raising a toddler on my own, I learned to swat emails on my smartphone in the grocery-store checkout line, and never left home without an article or book that I could read on the bench of the bus stop. All time was precious; even those skimpy morsels that Brigid Schulte calls "time confetti."

Some people hate the idea of filling those five- and 10-minute pauses in our otherwise hectic days with microtasking because it means we never have any down time. Others insist that they need large uninterrupted chunks of time to think critically and work effectively. But starving people never refuse crumbs. If hunger gnawed, I wouldn't reject a proffered stalk of celery because I'd prefer a steak.

Many of the tasks of busy academics can be done in bursts. Grade one paper. Draft a letter of recommendation. Rank one grant application. Respond to an online survey. Call a congresswoman. Make some travel arrangements. Format a bibliography. Check the hyperlinks in your endnotes.

Look at some of the more substantial items on your schedule and see if you can break them into smaller bits. Keep a running "to do" list of things that require between five to 20 minutes of your time, and then only do those things in your moments of time confetti. Save your precious unmolested stretches of time for the tasks that truly require it.

Kristen R. Ghodsee is a professor of gender, sexuality, and women's studies at Bowdoin College.

The hardest part of all was the soft scrabbling at the door. It took me three years to write my first book, and I (mostly) tried to read and write during the early morning hours before my two daughters woke up. But sometimes — like all young children — they were up and out of bed early, and while I struggled to maintain my focus on geocriticism in *The Sun Also Rises,* I could hear them scratching and rustling at the doorknob while my husband tried to lure them downstairs for breakfast. This is what the writing of my first book looked like.

If I were to offer advice about time management to younger colleagues (whatever their institutional affiliation), it would be this: Rid your mind of any romantic ideal of "the scholar." You will take notes in the margins of academic journals while you brush your teeth. You will outline your next article during campus outcomes assessment meetings. And you will compose cover letters to academic presses as you scrape ice from your windshield.

Laura G. Godfrey is an assistant chair of the department of English and humanities at North Idaho College.

I first came across the ventilation file in David Sternberg's classic *How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation.* I think it is close to a magic cure for academic writing resistance.

Here's how it works. You designate a file (electronic or actual) for writing down, in an unedited rush, project-related feelings. The file is where you dump the fear, anxiety, shame, resentment, frustration, self-doubt, and despair that academic writing stirs up.

Why does it work? Partly it's the catharsis of articulating your angst. If you chose to review rather than discard your words, it's also a chance to recognize and reflect on what is frustrating you. But mostly the magic of the ventilation file is that whenever you are stuck, deflected, or stalled, you can still be "working on your project" by using your ventilation file to express how miserable it is making you.

The ventilation file can also function as a diagnostic tool. If you can't commit to venting for 15 minutes a day, then you know you are refusing to work on your project. If you vent day after day, then you have a great record of the stories you are telling yourself to fuel your refusal.

Writing issues derail us unless and until they are recognized and addressed. So create a ventilation file, and give yourself a place to write about not wanting to write.

Joli Jensen is a professor of communication at the University of Tulsa.

All faculty have the same amount of time — although life stages and university demands do not always make it easy. Early in my career, I found myself saying yes to many overloads. I helped with the kids' homeroom work, Boy Scout projects, dance-team coaching. The practice of saying yes to overloads was part of the culture in the department, and led to little time for research. Here's a tip: Say no to overloads and extra committee and volunteer work, say yes to five to 10 hours a week for research.

Pamela L. Mickelson is a professor and chair of the department of business administration at Morningside College.

One of the biggest mistakes writers make is thinking that they'll "find" some time to write. As if, in our jam-packed lives, extra time were simply lying about or hidden in the couch cushions. The best advice for those struggling to balance teaching, research, and writing with responsibilities outside of the academy is:

Make time to write. Don't wait until you have a moment; seize a moment. Get up an hour earlier. Tell people you have a meeting, then go to a quiet spot alone and write for a couple of hours. (Don't feel guilty about this — people respect meeting time more than they respect writing time. You'll get the space you need to work, no questions asked.)

Be creative about when and where you write. Stop thinking you need to be at your desk or have every book or article you're referencing at your fingertips. If you have a normal writing space, that's ideal. But if you find yourself waiting at the DMV for 30 minutes, use that time to work on something. Doing laundry? Great, use the dryer cycle as a timer and get some writing in. Don't be afraid to use the devices we're already addicted to in order to get some writing done. I brainstorm using a notepad app on my phone. I do longhand writing in a notebook I carry with me. I edit and write documents stored in the cloud on my tablet. As an example, I wrote this on the subway on my commute home. On my phone. Using Google Drive. Really.

The truth is, none of us have time enough to write. Those of us who write regularly make time, fitting small chunks of writing time into our schedules wherever and whenever we can.

Theresa MacPhail is an assistant professor of science-and-technology studies at Stevens Institute of Technology.

Like many people, I sometimes struggle to keep the writing and development projects that will advance my career from being crowded out by other aspects of my work. The tool that has most helped me manage this is my Kanban board. Each piece of work is represented by a card on the board and moves through the stages of my workflow. The workflow on my board has just three lanes: to do, prioritized, and in progress. There is also a "parked" area for work I've purposely set aside, either because I'm waiting for something or because I've decided it is not a priority right now.

My Kanban board helps in several ways:

- Everything I plan to work on for the next few months is on that board, so I don't forget things. This minimizes last-minute emergencies that can eat into time I had scheduled to work on other projects.
- I have a limit on the number of items in progress at any one time, which makes it obvious that if I say "yes" to a new request, I am saying "no" to some other project already in progress.
- I can't ignore work that keeps getting pushed off to "later." A card languishing on the board forces me to ask myself why that task isn't getting done. Once I've understood the problem, I can work to solve it.

But perhaps the most important thing this system does is put my writing and development projects as seriously on par with the rest of my work. Those projects create cards on my Kanban board, just like all my other projects. Instead of trying to squeeze this important work in around the edges of my other work, it has a prominent place in my plan, where it belongs.

Melanie Nelson is a consultant focusing on scientific-information management and project management.

Some academics love to write. For the rest of us reluctant writers, here are some ways to get published in spite of yourself:

- Approach writing like physical exercise. Warm up with free writing; cool down by leaving cracker crumbs back through the woods to where you left off. These might include directions such as "develop this idea further" or "find research to support this idea."
- Trade the time you spend on one of your guilty pleasures, such as checking Facebook for updates on your high-school friends, for thinking and writing time. Reward yourself for spending that time by indulging in a brief dip into the guilty pleasure.
- Keep your writing appointments with yourself with the same faithfulness that you would schedule student appointments.

Susan Robison is a former professor and chair of the department of psychology at Notre Dame of Maryland University.

Ever notice that some faculty seem to have a million ideas to write about whereas you have much fewer? As it turns out, systematic productivity research shows that people who write frequently are more easily able to rapidly generate more new ideas to write about than people who do not write frequently. In other words, it is not people with the most ideas who write more, it is people who write more, then end up with the most ideas.

Because the very act of writing itself generates more ideas about what to write about, the first step to being a more productive scholarly writer is to dedicate time to writing — a blog, a white paper, an open letter to colleagues, whatever seems to be creative (annual performance reports do not count).

You do need a convenient way to capture ideas that pop into your head before they disappear. I've had great luck with emailing myself a quick note I can find later using a subject line of "ideabank" and keeping quick notes on my smartphone. My more-organized colleagues use a program like Evernote or carry around blank 3x5 cards.

Tim Slater is a professor of science education at the University of Wyoming.

This article is part of:
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