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10 Tips on How to Write Less Badly

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Most academics, including administrators, spend much of our time writing. But we aren't as good at it as we should be. I have never understood why our trade values, but rarely teaches, nonfiction writing.

In my nearly 30 years at universities, I have seen a lot of very talented people fail because they couldn't, or didn't, write. And some much less talented people (I see one in the mirror every morning) have done OK because they learned how to write.

It starts in graduate school. There is a real transformation, approaching an inversion, as people switch from taking courses to writing. Many of the graduate students who were stars in the classroom during the first two years—the people everyone admired and looked up to—suddenly aren't so stellar anymore. And a few of the marginal students—the ones who didn't care that much about pleasing the professors by reading every page of every assignment—are suddenly sending their own papers off to journals, getting published, and transforming themselves into professional scholars.

The difference is not complicated. It's writing.

Rachel Toor and other writers on these pages have talked about how hard it is to write well, and of course that's true. Fortunately, the standards of writing in most disciplines are so low that you don't need to write well. What I have tried to produce below are 10 tips on scholarly nonfiction writing that might help people write less badly.

1. Writing is an exercise. You get better and faster with practice. If you were going to run a marathon a year from now, would you wait for months and then run 26 miles cold? No, you would build up slowly, running most days. You might start on the flats and work up to more demanding and difficult terrain. To become a writer, write. Don't wait for that book manuscript or that monster external-review report to work on your writing.

2. Set goals based on output, not input. "I will work for three hours" is a delusion; "I will type three double-spaced pages" is a goal. After you write three pages, do something else. Prepare for class, teach, go to meetings, whatever. If later in the day you feel like writing some more, great. But if you don't, then at least you wrote something.

3. Find a voice; don't just "get published." James Buchanan won a Nobel in economics in 1986. One of the questions he asks job candidates is: "What are you writing that will be read 10 years from now? What about 100 years from now?" Someone once asked me that question, and it is pretty intimidating. And embarrassing, because most of us don't think that way. We focus on "getting published" as if it had nothing to do with writing about ideas or arguments. Paradoxically, if all you are trying to do is "get published," you may not publish very much. It's easier to write when you're interested in what you're writing about.

4. Give yourself time. Many smart people tell themselves pathetic lies like, "I do my best work at the last minute." Look: It's not true. No one works better under pressure. Sure, you are a smart person. But if you are writing about a profound problem, why would you think that you can make an important contribution off the top of your head in the middle of the night just before the conference?

Writers sit at their desks for hours, wrestling with ideas. They ask questions, talk with other smart people over drinks or dinner, go on long walks. And then write a whole bunch more. Don't worry that what you write is not very good and isn't immediately usable. You get ideas *when* you write; you don't just write down ideas.

The articles and books that will be read decades from now were written by men and women sitting at a desk and forcing themselves to translate profound ideas into words and then to let those words lead them to even more ideas. Writing can be magic, if you give yourself time, because you can produce in the mind of some other person, distant from you in space or even time, an image of the ideas that exist in only your mind at this one instant.

5. Everyone's unwritten work is brilliant. And the more unwritten it is, the more brilliant it is. We have all met those glib, intimidating graduate students or faculty members. They are at their most dangerous holding a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, in some bar or at an office party. They have all the answers. They can tell you just what they will write about, and how great it will be.

Years pass, and they still have the same pat, 200-word answer to "What are you working on?" It never changes, because they are not actually working on anything, except that one little act.

You, on the other hand, actually are working on something, and it keeps evolving. You don't like the section you just finished, and you are not sure what will happen next. When someone asks, "What are you working on?," you stumble, because it is hard to explain. The smug guy with the beer and the cigarette? He's a poseur and never actually writes anything. So he can practice his pat little answer endlessly, through hundreds of beers and thousands of cigarettes. Don't be fooled: You are the winner here. When you are actually writing, and working as hard as you should be if you want to succeed, you will feel inadequate, stupid, and tired. If you don't feel like that, then you aren't working hard enough.

6. Pick a puzzle. Portray, or even conceive, of your work as an answer to a puzzle. There are many interesting types of puzzles:

- "X and Y start with same assumptions but reach opposing conclusions. How?"
- "Here are three problems that all seem different. Surprisingly, all are the same problem, in disguise. I'll tell you why."
- "Theory predicts [something]. But we observe [something else]. Is the theory wrong, or is there some other factor we have left out?"

Don't stick too closely to those formulas, but they are helpful in presenting your work to an audience, whether that audience is composed of listeners at a lecture or readers of an article.

7. Write, then squeeze the other things in. Put your writing ahead of your other work. I happen to be a "morning person," so I write early in the day. Then I spend the rest of my day teaching, having meetings, or doing paperwork. You may be a "night person" or something in between. Just make sure you get in the habit of reserving your most productive time for writing. Don't do it as an afterthought or tell yourself you will write when you get a big block of time. Squeeze the other things in; the writing comes first.

8. Not all of your thoughts are profound. Many people get frustrated because they can't get an analytical purchase on the big questions that interest them. Then they don't write at all. So start small. The wonderful thing is that you may find that you have traveled quite a long way up a mountain, just by keeping your head down and putting one writing foot ahead of the other for a long time. It is hard to refine your questions, define your terms precisely, or know just how your argument will work until you have actually written it all down.

9. Your most profound thoughts are often wrong. Or, at least, they are not completely correct. Precision in asking your question, or posing your puzzle, will not come easily if the question is hard.

I always laugh to myself when new graduate students think they know what they want to work on and what they will write about for their dissertations. Nearly all of the best scholars are profoundly changed by their experiences in doing research and writing about it. They learn by doing, and sometimes what they learn is that they were wrong.

10. Edit your work, over and over. Have other people look at it. One of the great advantages of academe is that we are mostly all in this together, and we all know the terrors of that blinking cursor on a blank background. Exchange papers with peers or a mentor, and when you are sick of your own writing, reciprocate by reading their work. You need to get over a fear of criticism or rejection. Nobody's first drafts are good. The difference between a successful scholar and a failure need not be better writing. It is often more editing.

If you have trouble writing, then you just haven't written enough. Writing lots of pages has always been pretty easy for me. I could never get a job being only a writer, though, because I still don't write well. But by thinking about these tips, and trying to follow them myself, I have gotten to the point where I can make writing work for me and my career.

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