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# **The Value of 10 Minutes: Writing Advice for the Time-Less Academic**

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July 18, 2014

*Write every day.* Over the years, this is the single bit of advice I've given most regularly to

graduate students who aim to become professors. Unfortunately, after grad school, it's a lot easier said than done. The seminar and ABD stages present young scholars with a misleading sense that an academic schedule leaves relatively large blocks of time for writing.

With the possible exception of the summer research months, it doesn't. In fact, I think it's fair to say that writing time shrinks for most of us as our careers advance.

Though I was involved in departmental and university service as a graduate student, I was by no means prepared for the realities of a full-time academic job. In the first two to three years following graduation, university service requirements quadrupled, my teaching load increased, external consulting and reviewing activities proliferated, and so too did undergraduate- and graduate-advising duties. Throw in a house, a yard, maybe even a family, and you've got yourself a dilemma: For those of us who are required to write, or simply wish to write, time is not on our side.

During my dissertation phase, I developed a daily writing strategy that served me well for several years, which was to try to write at least two double-spaced pages first thing every morning. This strategy was an adaptation of a system practiced by one of my dissertation advisors, who writes for at least two hours each day. The two systems are a lot alike—especially since, for me, two pages of solid writing very often requires about two hours of work. Whereas some people work better with time limits, others find it more productive to set page goals. I continue to believe that systems such as these are ideal both for establishing a productive writing schedule and ingraining habits that will carry over well into a variety of academic positions after graduate school. (Those interested in learning more about such plans should see [\*Graduate Study for the 21st Century\*](#).) But there's the ideal and then there's real life. While I continue to dole out this advice on a regular basis, I'm finding it harder and harder to find two hours—or even time for two unspeakably bad pages—in my day.

What I often do have, in between meetings with students, classes, and so forth, is 10 or 15 minutes. My first inclination at such moments is to watch YouTube or check Twitter. That's because these activities are less intellectually demanding than the ones which, I've been led to believe, require considerably larger chunks of time and more sustained focus. Procrastination thrives on such assumptions. What can one really accomplish in 10 minutes anyway? Surely tomorrow, when that unexpected block of eight hours or so descends from the sky, I'll forget all my worries and finally write that article.

Right.

Most people make the mistake of surrendering these small bits of time to distractions. But what if we made a habit of using one, two, or even three of the 10- to 15-minute troughs in our day for real writing instead? My intention here isn't merely to promote the value of writing in fits and starts as a motivational strategy (a topic that's already covered well by [Joan Bolker](#)). Nor am I suggesting that such writing bursts will be of equal value to the longer stretches: Undoubtedly your best writing will still come in focused periods of about 90 to 120 minutes. But I can think of at least three reasons why writing in 10- to 15-minute bursts throughout your work week will make you a significantly more productive, focused, and satisfied writer. It may also make you a better teacher, colleague, even parent, by assuaging the feelings of guilt, anxiety, and resentment that sometimes result from not being able to write.

**Reason 1: It makes writing less daunting.** Let's start with the obvious point that writing in short bursts will declaw the activity of writing precisely by demystifying and normalizing it. If writing is something you can do in 10 minutes, like running to the mailroom or shoving a sandwich down your throat, then it seems hardly worth the paralyzing stress it tends to cause so many of us. More than any activity I know, writing provokes the worst forms of procrastination, leading in some cases to a downward spiral from which it can take us weeks—sometimes months!—to recover. There's nothing special about writing, though. Rather than stare at the wall for 10 minutes and stress out about never having enough time, use the time you do have to write a paragraph. Gradually you'll come to see that if you can manage a paragraph in those 10 minutes, you'll be able to do much more with two hours when time finally does slow down for you.

**Reason 2: It makes you want to write more.** Writing for 10 minutes can be effective for the specific reason that it's writing for only 10 minutes. A two-hour session can exhaust me and leave me feeling nauseous about my subject, the weakness of my style, or whatever. But a 10-minute interlude leaves me full of energy and wanting more. Later on, if an idea, or a superior formulation of one, pops into my head on that stretch between classrooms, I can't wait to get back to a screen to jot down my thoughts or put a new sentence on the page. Old feelings of dread about having to write have been transformed into an itching desire to write.

**Reason 3: It helps you stay in the flow.** One frustrating aspect of many two-hour writing sessions is the amount of time we can waste trying to remember what the hell we were writing about the last time out. By working in short bursts, you'll maintain a greater sense of focus on the general topic with which you're engaging, on the methodological or philosophical problems you need to solve to advance your argument, and most importantly, on the specific sentence or paragraph you'll be starting in on the next time you write. If I manage to snatch 10

minutes of writing time in between classes, then even the walk to my next class might be quite productive, as the specific problems with which I'm wrestling will tend to remain central in my mind. This greater focus on what I'm writing, then, which I'm able to maintain all day long, results in greater efficiency once I get back to my computer. The key to getting ahead is simply getting started, and writing in bursts can help us feel like we've always already begun.

Now, learning this technique will of course require just as much practice and patience as it took to master writing in larger chunks of time. That's why it makes sense to start now, in the summer, when you might be just a bit less busy than you are in the fall and spring semesters. So try making use of your 10-minute troughs over the coming weeks; it might well pay off for you during the madness of autumn.



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