

Navigating the research writing process

Academic writing at any stage of an academic career can be one of the most challenging aspects of the role. There will be many times that as academics we experience the dreaded writer's block and struggle to get words on the page. Here are some tips I have developed over the 11 years I have worked in academia which I have found helpful for helping overcome this issue. However, it is important to note that what works for me, will not necessarily work for you. Find your tools and add them to your toolkit after you have found them to be useful, and equally, discard the ones which don't work for you. We are all different, so please take these tips as guidance rather than instruction! Acknowledgement here should be paid to one of my colleagues Ellie Whittaker, as it was her Tweet about tips on academic writing (see point 10), which inspired me to write this!

1. Inspiration. When I was a PhD student, I attended a professional development lecture on "*Turbo-charge your writing*", facilitated by Hugh Kearns from "ThinkWell". This was, without a doubt, one of the most inspirational sessions I have ever attended and gave some really useful practical advice on how to overcome issues of academic writing. To this day, I find

inspiration from these insights and hope to encourage you to also engage with the insights and resources which are offered by Hugh and the "ThinkWell" team. These are readily available through [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) or their [website](#).

2. Approach top down. I start with a visual framework of the research. What are the constructs I am writing about and how do they fit together. This really helps me approach the writing by seeing how everything fits into one framework and helps give coherence in my mind so it's easier for me to express to others. I frequently use Powerpoint to create flowcharts for this. This has a subsequent benefit as I can then use these visuals to help disseminate my research in conference presentations and for representing my CV for my [personal website](#).

3. Get the writing juices flowing. The problem with academic writing is that it gets so restricted by academic conventions and language. Sometimes the best way to know what to say (or write) is to write something related to your topic of interest but that is not academically targeted. This is where blog posts or general interest pieces can be useful. I have found that my engagement with media and public engagement activities have been really helpful for this, as it helps me consolidate

the main messages of my research insights whereby when I come to academic writing, these can be transmitted much more clearly and integrated into the academic conventions which are required. If you do not have a specific platform for disseminating in this way, this is not crucial as you can still write in a non-academic way simply for your own benefit.

4. Go with the flow. Once you have found a flow in a writing session, don't stop to correct spelling, grammar and add perfect referencing formatting. When something is in your head to write, get it down and go back after to refine. A train of thought is always worth pursuing and getting down on paper, no matter how badly it is spelt and written on the first draft!

5. Safety in numbers! A writing buddy is a must (in my opinion)! This doesn't need to be someone in your own field necessarily but someone to have writing days and space with for working and supporting each other. I find that "Writing Residentials" (which usually end up being hosted at someone's house) are an excellent way to find this space to write. The format which works for me is that my writing buddy and I start our writing day fairly early and set out our goals for the day (i.e what do we want to have completed, what do we want to have started etc). We break around mid-morning for

coffee and a snack and review where we are up to, and then push on until lunch. At this point, we re-review and find that we naturally have conversations about what we are working on (which often are different projects) and sometimes help each other resolve issues we may have met during the day. This is followed by more focused writing or research work in which the day is concluded by us congratulating ourselves on a successful writing event (sometimes in the presence of wine...). This is one of the most helpful approaches to supporting writing (and research more generally) in my experience, so would encourage anyone who has not yet tried out a writing buddy approach to do so. This may be particularly useful for PhD students. See [here](#) for an account of this, although many of the principles stand for any type of writing, irrespective of the stage of one's academic career.

6. Focus, focus, focus. If, like me, you work in an area which requires you to write research reports, sometimes the results and discussion of these can start to become overwhelming. This may particularly be the case if you either have lots of different types of data within one research project or just have a sheer quantity of it. If you are approaching the write up of results and the discussion of these results, and lost on where to start and pin it all together, go back

to your research questions. Rewrite these out if need be, and write how your results correspond to each these as a starting point. From here, you will have a discussion which is at least focused around what you intended to find out and the rest will most likely fall into place around this in due course.

7. Consolidation is key. If you struggle with writing literature reviews, then here is something I find really useful myself. Write a quick summary of every key piece of research which is relevant to the research issue you are writing about into one document. Following this, map all the commonalities, find the general themes of findings across these summaries, and then write summary statements bringing the insights together (e.g., studies have found that XX is related to YYY (references of all studies this is relevant to)). These statements then form the basis for your own literature review in which you have consolidated the insights from the literature and can develop your narrative from there onwards.

8. Verbalise. I say this a lot, but the challenges of academic writing in my view, are primarily because of the jungle of academic jargon and conventions which place restrictions on us to articulate what we actually want to “say”. As such, being

able to verbally articulate what you want to say for a given academic writing piece can be helpful in moving away from this restriction and instead establishing what your main message is. Verbalisation can occur in many forms; either via having a writing buddy (see point 5) to chat about your research, engaging in networking events or conferences to discuss your research or even audio recording yourself talking through your research. All can help overcome the “academic-ness” and help the main discourse become more clear. In turn, I have found this really helps the writing process as it provides greater clarity and expression of the main points and arguments I want to make.

9. Little and often. If academic writing has started to become a burden and seems to be a major deal then it’s time to look at it differently. Consider your email inbox; for most people we will check this daily and deal with it on a fairly regular basis and things get sorted from this (usually). Take academic writing in a similar way; if we do a bit of this every working day then things start to get done and the perception of this being a major unmanageable task, should hopefully start to dissipate. Even if your daily writing is summarising a research article (as identified in point 7), this is going somewhere to help you get words on a page and master the art of overcoming writer’s

block. Even a few words every working day is contributing something, so see it as a routine rather than a chore.

10. “Tweet Tweet”. If you struggle to focus on writing in a designated block of time, use systems which help you get your ideas on paper (or electronic formats) which can be consolidated at a later date to form the basis for a written piece. As an example, the majority of this piece itself was informed by random ideas I put forward on a Twitter thread in response to a colleague’s [Tweet](#) about tips on academic writing. As such, the ideas were already there, but I have refined and developed from the series of Tweets I had previously written to form what is now (hopefully) a more well- articulated and useful account. This doesn’t need to be done via such public means such as Twitter (unless of course, you find this useful for you), but can be random thoughts and insights which can be consolidated over time to be the basis for something really special.

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