

Writing Through Challenges: Strategies and Resources For Graduate Scholars

Understanding Personal Writing Habits

Writing Habits Diagnostic Quiz: <http://writersdiet.com/base.php>

Helen Sword classifies four aspects of an effective writing practice:

Behavioural habits

- “Successful writers carve out time and space for their writing in a striking variety of ways, but they all do it somehow.”

Artisanal habits

- “Successful writers recognize writing as an artisanal activity that requires ongoing learning, development, and skill.”

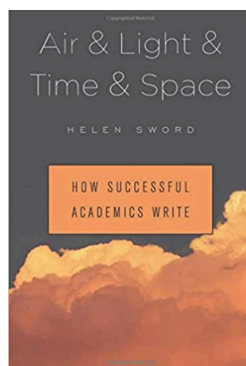
Social habits

- “Successful writers seldom work entirely in isolation . . . they typically rely on other people—colleagues, friends, family, editors, reviewers, audiences, students—to provide them with support and feedback.”

Emotional habits

- “Successful writers cultivate modes of thinking that emphasize pleasure, challenge, and growth.”

(Sword, 2017, p.4)



Source:

Sword, H. (2017). *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Behavioural Habits

“Successful writers carve out time and space for their writing in a striking variety of ways, but they all do it somehow.” (Sword, 2017, p.4)

Common Challenges:

- I can't find the time to write
 - I try to write all at once and/or at the last minute
 - I can't keep to a regular writing schedule
 - I don't know where to start on larger projects
 - I'm easily distracted while trying to write
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Strategies:

1. Set SMART goals (Specific, Measureable, Actionable, Realistic, Timely)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4IU-y9-J8Q&t=112s>

2. Write in regular intervals using the Pomodoro technique

<https://francescocirillo.com/pages/pomodoro-technique>

3. Create an accountability structure:

<https://www.academicwritingsuccess.com/writing-accountability/>

4. If you are struggling to get started, consider using the freewriting technique:

<https://writingprocess.mit.edu/process/step-1-generate-ideas/instructions/freewriting>

Resources:

Distraction Blocking

Cold Turkey Blocker

<http://getcoldturkey.com/>

Cost: Free version available, or you can purchase a Pro version for \$29

How it works: Overall, Cold Turkey lets you block specific applications/websites, the whole internet, and even your entire computer (only allowing you to type to meet your word goal). When activated, blocks will automatically affect all supported browsers: Chrome, Firefox, Safari, Opera, Brave and Vivaldi (for Windows and macOS). The free version allows you to choose individual websites and durations, the pro version allows you to block your entire computer, create a repeating schedule, add a password, breaks, and set daily time limits.

Freedom (for PC, Mac, iPhone or Android)

<https://freedom.to/welcome>

Cost: The free version will block up to two sites. The premium version is \$6.99 for one month, \$29.4 for one year, or you can purchase a permanent version for \$129.

How it works: Freedom can block the entire internet or selected sites. You can schedule recurring sessions or schedule blocks in advance.

Goal Setting and Progress Tracking

Pacemaker

<https://www.pacemaker.press/>

Cost: The free version allows for 2 projects. The premium versions (\$8/month, or \$72 per year) allow for unlimited project plans, and open up additional features.

How it works: “You set a word count goal, chip away at it day by day and finish on-time! You can approach your writing target in various ways to suit your style.”

PhD Toolkit

<https://www.ithinkwell.com.au/resources/PhDToolkit>

Cost: Free

How it works: You can download different customizable planners and templates.

RescueTime (Mac, PC and Android laptops and mobile phones)

<https://www.rescuetime.com/>

Cost: The free version, RescueTime Lite, includes basic features and generates reports about how you spend your time. RescueTime Premium (\$9/month) generates reports and blocks online sites.

How it works: RescueTime allows you to block distractions, set time limits on apps and websites, and schedule RescueTime sessions for deep work or studying.

Because it tracks your work habits, it also provides breakdowns of computer use by category (productive vs. distracting) and application.

Habitica (Mac, PC, and Android laptops and mobile phones)

<https://habitica.com/static/front>

Cost: The basic version is free. Group plans are \$9/month, plus +\$3/member.

How it works: “Habitica is a video game to help you improve real life habits. It ‘gamifies’ your life by turning all your tasks . . . into little monsters you have to conquer. The better you are at this, the more you progress in the game. If you slip up in life, your character starts backsliding in the game.”

Forest

<https://www.forestapp.cc/>

Cost: One time cost of \$2.79. In-app purchase options can support a real-tree-planting organization.

How it works: This app uses virtual trees to inspire users to better manage their time and go phone-free. Whenever you want to stay focused, plant a tree. Your tree will grow while you focus on your work. Leaving the app halfway will cause your tree to die. As you continue using the app, you can turn your work sessions into a forest.

Beeminder

<https://beeminder.com>

Cost: The free version tracks up to 3 goals. For unlimited goals and added features, different pricing plans are also available.

How it works: Beeminder promotes completion of quantifiable goals by tracking progress along a Yellow Brick Road. If you go off track, you pledge money to stay on the road the next time. If you go off track again, the pledged amount is charged.

Pomodoro Timer**Marinara Timer**

<https://www.marinaratimer.com/>

Cost: Free

How it works: This is a customizable Pomodoro-style timer. Based on your productivity goals, you can set different time segments, and can even share your productivity timer with others to complete collaborative tasks more efficiently.

Project Management**Trello**

<https://trello.com/>

Cost: Free version available. Paid versions offer a wider range of services and expanded capacity. They are priced at 9.99/month and \$20.83/month.

How it works: Trello is a project management tool, available as an app and website. It offers a visual way to manage and organize personal or team projects. Once you start a project board, you can create lists, open a card, add comments, upload file attachments, create checklists, add labels and due dates, and more.

Artisanal Habits

“Successful writers recognize writing as an artisanal activity that requires ongoing learning, development, and skill” (Sword, 2017, p.4)

Common Challenges:

- I am struggling with the mechanics of writing (spelling, grammar, diction, etc)
 - I have difficulty revising my work after finishing a first draft
 - I am confused about the expectations for a particular type of writing
 - I need help figuring out the formatting and/or structural requirements
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Strategies:

1. Connect with the writing services unit on your campus to book a consultation appointment, or to be directed toward additional resources.
2. For dissertation projects: look up past theses from graduates within your Department to get a better sense of structure/formatting expectations.

Institutional Repositories:

McMaster University <https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/>

University of Waterloo <https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/handle/10012/6>

Western University <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/>

3. For research papers: familiarize yourself with the journals in your field (specific focus, submission requirements, etc). Once you identify possible platforms for your work, read some of the published articles for cues about structure/formatting expectations.

Resources:

Manchester Academic Phrasebank

<http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/>

Cost: Free

How it works: This resource provides writers with general examples of common phrases in academic writing. It is organized according to the main sections of a research paper or dissertation (top bar menu), and further refined by general language functions (left side bar menu).

Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)

<https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>

Cost: Free

How it works: This resource can be useful for self-editing in instances where you are debating between different phrasing options. It contains more than one billion words of text, obtained from eight genres (spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, academic texts, TV and Movies subtitles, blogs, and other web pages). When you type in words or phrases, you can see the relative frequency, context, and other usage trends.

Reference Management Software

1. Short video tutorial for Zotero, and comparison chart for different options:

<https://guides.lib.uw.edu/research/citations/citation-tools>

2. Mendelay video tutorials:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTfVCiksapk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxgwBZMGq8k>

3. Detailed comparison of different options:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparison_of_reference_management_software

4. Scholarly discussion of individual approaches:

https://www.researchgate.net/post/Which_is_the_best_Reference_Management_Software_for_research_scholars

Social Habits

“Successful writers seldom work entirely in isolation . . . they typically rely on other people—colleagues, friends, family, editors, reviewers, audiences, students—to provide them with support and feedback” (Sword, 2017, p.4)

Common Challenges:

- I have trouble getting another perspective on my writing
 - I don't feel motivated when writing alone
 - I have trouble focusing on my work or writing regularly
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Strategies:

1. Joining or forming a writing group can help provide additional motivation by serving as a source of support and accountability.

Helpful Guide:

<https://www.academicwritingsuccess.com/4-terrific-types-of-writing-groups/>

2. If possible, share your drafts/ideas with a peer or colleague to receive preliminary feedback.

Resource:

Focusmate

<https://www.focusmate.com/>

Cost: 3 free sessions per week, paid option available.

How it works: Focusmate allows for virtual coworking. Each session is 50 minutes. You get matched with another user and you tell each other what you will be working on during the session. You then silently work on your individual tasks. Users are encouraged to keep audio and video on during the sessions as a form of additional accountability and motivation. At the end of the session, users update each other on progress, and say goodbye.

Emotional Habits

“Successful writers cultivate modes of thinking that emphasize pleasure, challenge, and growth” (Sword, 2017, p.4)

Common Challenges:

- I feel overwhelmed by writing tasks
 - I get discouraged by setbacks or lack of progress
 - I am overly critical about my own writing
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Strategies:

1. Keep a writing journal to track your thought process and writing progress
<https://uksw.edu.pl/images/Short-Guide-Reflective-Writing.pdf>

You can design your own writing journal format, but make sure to include the following aspects: daily goal, something you did well, something you want to improve, and an action plan for the next day.

2. If relevant, reach out to the mental health and wellness services on your campus.
3. Start/maintain a physical exercise routine. Similarly, take breaks during your writing sessions to stretch.

Resources:

Coffitivity

<https://coffitivity.com/>

Cost: Free, with premium version available.

How it works: This website allows you to customize the amount of ambient noise. It is useful for people who can't work in silence, or need to drown out distractions.

Noisli (app or browser)

www.noisli.com

Cost: The free version allows for up to 16 sounds, and 1.5 hours per day of streaming. Paid versions offer expanded features.

How it works: You can mix and match different sounds to create a custom sound environment, or can listen to curated Playlists. Noisli also offers a Timer that helps you work in sessions in order to prevent burnout, and a Text Editor.