Introduction

How to Write a Lot is about becoming a reflective, disciplined writer—it isn’t about cranking out fluff, publishing second-rate material for the sake of amassing publications, or turning a crisp journal article into an exegetical exposition. Most psychologists would like to write more than they do, and they would like writing to involve less stress, guilt, and uncertainty. This book is for them. I take a practical, behavior-oriented approach to writing. We won’t talk about insecurities, feelings of avoidance and defensiveness, or inner mental blocks that hold people back. We won’t talk about developing new skills, either—you already have the basic skills needed to write productively, although you’ll improve with practice. And we won’t talk about unleashing your inner anything: Put your “inner writer” back on its leash and muzzle it.

Instead, we’ll talk about your outer writer. Writing productively is about actions that you aren’t doing but could easily do: making a schedule, setting clear goals, keeping track of your work, rewarding yourself, and
building good habits. Productive writers don't have special gifts or special traits—they just spend more time writing and use this time more efficiently (Keyes, 2003). Changing your behavior won't necessarily make writing fun, but it will make writing easier and less oppressive.

**Writing is Hard**

If you do research, you probably enjoy it. Research is oddly fun. Talking about ideas and finding ways to test your ideas is intellectually gratifying. Data collection is enjoyable, too, especially when other people do it for you. Even data analysis is fun—it's exciting to see if a study worked. But writing about research isn't fun: Writing is frustrating, complicated, and un-fun. "If you find that writing is hard," wrote William Zinsser (2001), "it's because it is hard" (p. 12). To write a journal article, you need to cram complex scientific ideas, methodological details, and statistical analyses into a tight manuscript. It isn't easy, especially when you know that anonymous reviewers will thrash that manuscript like a dusty carpet.

Because collecting data is easier than writing about data, many professors have dark backlogs of studies. They intend to publish those data "someday"—"some decade" is more realistic. Because they struggle with writing, professors yearn for 3-day weekends, spring breaks, vacations, and the summer months. But on the Tuesday after a 3-day weekend, people groan and grumble about how little they wrote. In a big department, the 1st week after summer break is a din of lamentation and self-reproach. This sad cycle of yearning and disappointment begins anew as people search for the next big block of time. Psychologists usually find these big blocks on the weekends, evenings, and vacations. Writing usurps time that should be spent on important leisure activities like spending time with friends and family, making lentil soup, or knitting the dog a Santa hat.

And, as luck would have it, the standards for writing are higher than ever. More psychologists are sending more papers to more journals; more researchers are competing for a shrinking pool of grant money. Deans and department chairs expect more publications than before. Whereas the cheery Provosts of Christmases Past were happy if faculty happened to submit a grant, the grim Provosts of Christmases Present expect new faculty to submit grants. Some departments now require faculty to receive a grant as a condition of promotion and tenure. At research-oriented colleges and universities, poor productivity is why people fail to receive tenure or promotion. Even small teaching-oriented colleges have raised their expectations for scholarly publications. It's a hard time to start a career in academic psychology.

**The Way We Learn Now**

Writing is a skill, not an innate gift or a special talent. Like any advanced skill, writing must be developed
through systematic instruction and practice. People must learn rules and strategies and then practice them (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). Psychology has discovered that deliberate practice breeds skill, but it hasn’t applied this knowledge to the training of writing. Compare the teaching of writing with the teaching of other professional skills. Teaching is hard, so we train our graduate students how to do it. Students commonly take a “teaching psychology” seminar and practice teaching by serving as teaching assistants. Many graduate students serve as teaching assistants every semester and become skilled teachers. Statistics and research methods are hard, so we have students take several semesters of advanced classes on these topics, taught by experts in methods and statistics. After many semesters, some students become sophisticated methodologists.

How does psychology train graduate students to write? The most common model of training is to presume that graduate students will learn about writing from their advisors. But many students’ advisors are struggling writers who themselves complain about not finding time to write, who pine for spring break and the summer months—the bland are leading the blind. It isn’t their fault: Like the students they advise, most college professors had to learn writing “on the street.” Some departments teach writing as part of professional skills classes. Although valuable, these classes ignore the motivational struggles of writing and focus instead on grant-writing and the basics of style.

After the students leave graduate school, they won’t have an advisor to hound them about their half-finished manuscripts—they’ll need the skills to start and finish projects on their own. It’s sad, I think, that we expect more from the next generation of writers but fail to train to meet our higher standards.

**This Book’s Approach**

Academic writing can become a sordid drama. Professors feel oppressed by half-done manuscripts, complain about cruel rejections from journals, scramble breathlessly to submit grant proposals the day before the deadlines, fantasize about the halcyon summer days of writing, and curse the foul start of the semester for stunting their productivity. Psychology is dramatic enough already—we don’t need this kind of drama. All of these practices are bad. Academic writing should be more routine, boring, and mundane than it is. To foster a mundane view of writing, this book says nothing about the “soul of writing,” the nondenominational “spirit of writing,” or even the secular “essence of writing.” Only poets talk about the soul of writing. You should write like a normal person, not like a poet and certainly not like a psychologist. And this book says nothing about anyone’s insecure feelings of “defensiveness” and “avoidance”; go to your local bookstore’s self-help section for that. *How to Write a Lot* views writing as a set of concrete behaviors, such as (a) sitting on a chair, bench, stool, ottoman, toilet, or patch of
grass and (b) slapping your flippers against the keyboard to generate paragraphs. You can foster these behaviors using simple strategies. Let everyone else procrastinate, daydream, and complain—spend your time sitting down and moving your mittens.

While you read this book, remember that writing isn’t a race or a game. Write as much or as little as you want. Don’t feel that you ought to write more than you want to write, and don’t publish fluffy nonsense just for the sake of publishing. Don’t mistake psychologists who have a lot of publications for psychologists with a lot of good ideas. Psychologists publish articles for many reasons, but scientific communication is the best reason. Publication is the natural, necessary endpoint of the scientific process. Scientists communicate through the written word, and published articles form psychology’s body of knowledge about what people are like and why they do what they do. I suspect that most psychologists feel thwarted as writers—they would like to write more, and they’d like writing to be easier—and this book is for them.

Looking Ahead

This short book provides a practical, personal look at how to write a lot. In Chapter 2, we scrutinize some of the bad reasons people give for not writing. We’ll attack these specious barriers by showing that they have no effect on how much you write. The chapter introduces the strategy of allotting time to write by making a writing schedule. Chapter 3 provides motivational tools for sticking to your writing schedule. You’ll learn how to set good goals, to use priorities to manage many projects at once, and to monitor your writing progress. To bolster your new habits, you can start a writing group with some friends. Chapter 4 shows you how to start an araphia group—a social support group for fostering constructive writing habits—for fun and profit. Chapter 5 describes strategies for writing well. Well-written papers and grant proposals stand out from the greasy masses of mediocre papers and proposals, so you should strive to write as well as you can.

Chapters 6 and 7 apply the principles of writing a lot. Chapter 6 gives a practical, in-the-trenches view of writing articles for psychology journals. We may not like reading scientific articles, but we must write them. Prolific writers told me how they write articles, and editors of major journals told me what they want to see in an article. Chapter 6 discusses common questions about mundane aspects of publishing, such as how to write cover letters to editors and how to work with coauthors. Chapter 7 describes how to write scholarly books, because psychology has few resources for aspiring book writers. I provide a personal look at how to write books and describe how to work with publishers. Chapter 8 concludes this brief book with some encouraging words.
Specious Barriers to Writing a Lot

Writing is a grim business, much like repairing a sewer or running a mortuary. Although I’ve never dressed a corpse, I’m sure that it’s easier to embalm the dead than to write an article about it. Writing is hard, which is why so many of us do so little of it. If you’re reading this book, you probably know how it feels to be thwarted. When I talk with professors and graduate students about writing, they always mention certain barriers. They want to write more, but they believe that there are things holding them back. I call these specious barriers: At first they appear to be legitimate reasons for not writing, but they crumble under critical scrutiny. This chapter looks at the most common barriers to writing a lot and describes simple ways to overcome them.

Specious Barrier 1

"I can’t find time to write," also known as "I would write more if I could just find big blocks of time."
This specious barrier is destined for academia’s hall of fame. We’ve all used this one; some thwarted writers have elevated it to a guiding life theme. But this belief is specious, just like the belief that people use only 10% of their brains. Like most false beliefs, this barrier persists because it’s comforting. It’s reassuring to believe that circumstances are against you and that you would write a lot if only your schedule had a few more big chunks of time to devote to writing. And your friends around the department understand because they have a hard time finding time to write, too. It’s oddly soothing to collude with your colleagues, to bask collectively in the cold glow of frustration.

Why is this barrier specious? The key lies in the word find. When people endorse this specious barrier, I imagine them roaming through their schedules like naturalists in search of Time To Write, that most elusive and secretive of creatures. Do you need to “find time to teach”? Of course not—you have a teaching schedule, and you never miss it. If you think that writing time is lurking somewhere, hidden deep within your weekly schedule, you will never write a lot. If you think that you won’t be able to write until a big block of time arrives, such as spring break or the summer months, then you’ll never write a lot. Finding time is a destructive way of thinking about writing. Never say this again.

Instead of finding time to write, allot time to write. Prolific writers make a schedule and stick to it. It’s that simple. Right now, take a few moments to think about the writing schedule that you want to have. Think about your week: Are there some hours that are generally free every week? If you teach on Tuesdays and Thursdays, maybe Monday and Wednesday mornings are good times to write. If you feel energized in the afternoon or evening, maybe later times would work well for you. Each person will have a different set of good times for writing, given his or her other commitments. The secret is the regularity, not the number of days or the number of hours. It doesn’t matter if you pick 1 day a week or all 5 weekdays—just find a set of regular times, write them in your weekly planner, and write during those times. To begin, allot a mere 4 hours per week. After you see the astronomical increase in your writing output, you can always add more hours.

When we talk about writing schedules, most people ask me about my schedule. (Some people ask defiantly, as if expecting me to shrug and say “Well, sticking to a schedule is easier said than done.”) I write Monday through Friday, between 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. I wake up, make coffee, and sit down at my desk. To avoid distractions, I don’t check e-mail, take a shower, or change my clothes before writing—I literally get up and start to write. The start and end times shift somewhat, but I spend around 2 hours writing each weekday. I’m not a morning person, but mornings work well for writing. I can get some writing out of the way before getting wrapped up in checking my mail and meeting students and colleagues who drop by the office.
Most people use a wasteful, unproductive strategy called binge writing (Kellogg, 1994). After intending to write, procrastinating, and feeling guilty and anxious about procrastinating, binge writers finally devote a Saturday to nothing but writing. This creates some text and alleviates the guilt, and the binge-writing cycle begins anew. Binge writers spend more time feeling guilty and anxious about not writing than schedule followers spend writing. When you follow a schedule, you no longer worry about not writing, complain about not finding time to write, or indulge in fantasies about how much you’ll write over the summer. Instead, you write during your allotted times and then forget about it. We have better things to worry about than writing. I worry about whether I drink too much coffee or whether my dog drinks from the fetid backyard pond, but I don’t worry about finding time to write this book: I know that I’ll do it tomorrow at 8:00 a.m.

When confronted with their fruitless ways, binge writers often proffer a self-defeating dispositional attribution: “I’m just not the kind of person who’s good at making a schedule and sticking to it.” This is nonsense, of course. People like dispositional explanations when they don’t want to change (Jellison, 1993). People who claim that they’re “not the scheduling kind of person” are masterly schedulers at other times: They always teach at the same time, go to bed at the same time, watch their favorite TV shows at the same time, and so on. I’ve met people who jogged at the same daily time, regardless of snow or rain, but claimed that they didn’t have the willpower to stick to a daily writing schedule. Don’t quit before you start—making a schedule is the secret to productive writing. If you don’t plan to make a schedule, gently close this book, clean it so it looks brand new, and give it as a gift to a friend who wants to be a better writer.

You must ruthlessly defend your writing time. Remember, you’re allocating time to write, not finding time to write. You decided that this time is your time to write. Your writing time is not the time to meet with colleagues, students, or graduate advisors; it isn’t the time to grade papers or develop lectures; and it certainly isn’t the time to check e-mail, read the newspaper, or catch the weather report. Close your Internet access, turn off your phone, and shut the door. (I used to hang a “Do Not Disturb” sign on my office door, but people interpreted this as “His door is closed, but he wants me to know he’s in there. I’ll knock.”)

Be forewarned that other people will not respect your commitment to your writing time. Well-intentioned intruders will want to schedule meetings with you, and they won’t understand why you say no. They’ll resent your inflexibility, call you rigid, and think that there’s some deeper reason why you won’t meet with them. For me, a common problem is that graduate students want to hold committee meetings at 9:00 a.m.—the time is convenient for them, but it’s during my writing time. Likewise, I’ve been on some service committees in which the only time the whole group could meet was during my scheduled writing time.
How can you handle well-intentioned intruders? Just say no—that phrase might not keep you drug free, Nancy Reagan to the contrary, but it works for protecting your writing time. You have two good reasons for saying no. First, only bad writers will hold your refusal against you. I haven't met a serious writer who didn't respect my commitment to my writing time. They might be displeased that I can't meet at their preferred time, but they appreciate that scheduling is the only way to write a lot. (These people also refuse to meet with me during their scheduled writing times.) The people who grumble and whine are the unproductive writers. Don't get dragged into their bad habits. Second, the people who are happy to intrude on your writing time would never ask to intrude on your teaching time, your time that you spend with your family, or your sleeping time. They simply see your writing time as less important. As an academic psychologist, you're a professional writer, just as you're a professional teacher. Treat your scheduled writing time like your scheduled teaching time. So say no to well-intentioned intruders, and explain why you can't (not won't, but can't) break your committed writing time. If you feel bad about saying no, then lie. If you feel bad about lying, then use the obscurantism you learned in grad school: Claim a "recurring intractable obligation" or a "previously encumbered temporal placement."

Always write during your scheduled time, but don't be dogmatic about writing only within this time. It's great if you keep writing after the period is over or if you do some writing on a nonwriting day—I call this windfall writing. Once you harness the terrible power of habit, it'll be easier for you to sit down and write. Beware, however, of the temptation to usurp your writing schedule with windfall writing. It doesn't matter how much you wrote over spring break—you committed to your scheduled time, and you're going to stick to it. If you find yourself saying absurdities like "I wrote a lot over the weekend, so I'll skip my scheduled period on Monday," this book can help: Close it, hold it between the thumb and index finger of your nondominant hand, and wave it menacingly in front of your face.

Perhaps you're surprised by the notion of scheduling. "Is that really the trick?" you ask. "Isn't there another way to write a lot?" Nope—making a schedule and sticking to it is the only way. There is no other way to write a lot. After exhaustively researching the work habits of successful writers, Ralph Keyes (2003), a professional writer, noted that "the simple fact of sitting down to write day after day is what makes writers productive" (p. 49). If you allot 4 hours a week for writing, you will be surprised at how much you will write. By surprised, I mean astonished; and by astonished, I mean dumbfounded and incoherent. You'll find yourself committing unthinkable perversions, like finishing grant proposals early. You'll get an invitation to revise and resubmit a paper, and you'll do it within a week.
You'll be afraid to talk with friends in your department about writing out of the fear that they'll think, "You're not one of us anymore"—and they'll be right.

**Specky Barrier 2**

"I need to do some more analyses first," aka, "I need to read a few more articles."

This specky barrier, perhaps the most insidious of all, has wreaked a lot of havoc. At first, this barrier seems reasonable. "After all," you might say, "you can't write a journal article without doing statistics or reading a lot of articles." True, but I've met some unproductive writers who chant this specky barrier like a mantra. Their colleagues respect them at first, believing them to be perfectionists or obsessive data analysts. But they never write much, and they never do those analyses, either. Binge writers are also binge readers and binge statisticians. The bad habits that keep them from writing also keep them from doing the prewriting (Kellogg, 1994), the reading, outlining, idea generation, and data analysis necessary for generating text. Like all specky barriers, this one doesn't withstand a close look.

It's easy to pull away this creepy crutch: Do whatever you need to do during your allotted writing time. Need to crunch some more statistics? Do it during your scheduled time. Need to read some articles? Do it during your scheduled time. Need to review page proofs? Do it during your scheduled time. Need to read a book about writing to get advice? You know when to do it. Writing is more than typing words: Any action that is instrumental in completing a writing project counts as writing. When writing journal articles, for example, I often spend a few consecutive writing periods working on the analyses. Sometimes I spend a whole writing period on ignominious aspects of writing, like reviewing a journal's submission guidelines, making figures and tables, or checking page proofs.

This is another reason why scheduling time to write is the only way to write a lot. Professional writing involves a lot of components: extensive literature reviews, careful analyses, and precisely worded descriptions of research methods. We will never "find the time" to retrieve and read all of the necessary articles, just as we'll never "find the time" to write a review of those articles. Use your scheduled writing time to do it. You'll no longer feel stressed about finding time to read those papers or do those analyses, because you know when you'll do it.

**Specky Barrier 3**

"To write a lot, I need a new computer" (see also "a laser printer," "a nice chair," "a better desk").

Of the specky barriers, this is the most desperate. I'm not sure that people really believe this one—unlike the other specky barriers, this may be a mere excuse. A personal story might dispel this barrier. When I started writing seriously during graduate school, I
bought an ancient computer from a fellow student's boyfriend. This computer was prehistoric even by 1996 standards: no mouse, no Windows, just a keyboard and WordPerfect 5.0 for DOS. When the computer died, taking some of my files with it to its grave, I bought a portable computer that I typed into the ground. I'm writing this book on a slow, tottering Toshiba laptop that I bought back in 2001—in computer years, my laptop is collecting Social Security.

For nearly eight years, I used a metal folding chair as my official writing chair. When the folding chair retired, I replaced it with a more stylish but equally hard vintage Eames fiberglass chair. It's a simple chair: it lacks upholstery and padding, and I can't adjust the height or make it tilt. For the curious, Figure 2.1 shows where I wrote this book. There's a big, simple desk (note the lack of drawers, keyboard trays, fancy hanging-file systems, and so on) with a laser printer and a coaster for my coffee. Before I splurged on this Blu Dot desk, I had a $10 particleboard folding table, which in a nod to fashion I covered with a $4 tablecloth. I wrote most of my book about interest (Silvia, 2006) and around 20 journal articles sitting on my folding chair in front of that folding table.

Unproductive writers often bemoan the lack of "their own space" to write. I'm not sympathetic to this creaky excuse. I've never had my own room as a home office or private writing space. In a string of small apartments and houses, I wrote on a small table in the living room, in my bedroom, in the guest bedroom, in the master bedroom, and even (briefly) in a bathroom. I wrote this book in the guest bedroom in my house. Even now, after writing all those books and articles and after buying a house, I still don't have my own space at home to write. But I don't need it—there's always a free bathroom.

I've heard a surprising number of binge writers complain about printers as barriers to writing. "If only I had a laser printer at home," they complain, with wistful yearning in their voices. They don't realize that you can't print articles like you print money—a printer only outputs what you sat down and wrote. I love my laser printer, and serious writers should buy a good one, but they're inessential. When T. Shelley Duval
and I wrote our book about self-awareness (Duval & Silvia, 2001), I had a Stone Age inkjet, and he didn’t have a printer. It takes a long time to print a book on an inkjet printer; we eventually printed our drafts in cyan and maroon when the black ink ran out.

When unproductive writers complain that they don’t have fast Internet access at home, I congratulate them on their sound judgment. A close look at Figure 2.1 shows that there’s no Internet cable plugged into the computer. My wife has fast Internet access in her home office, but I don’t have anything. It’s a distraction. Writing time is for writing, not for checking e-mail, reading the news, or browsing the latest issues of journals. Sometimes I think it would be nice to download articles while writing, but I can do that at the office. The best kind of self-control is to avoid situations that require self-control.

“In order to write,” wrote William Saroyan (1952), “all a man needs is paper and a pencil” (p. 42). Equipment will never help you write a lot; only making a schedule and sticking to it will make you a productive writer. If you won’t take my word for it, consider a recent interview with Bill Stumpf. A legend in the world of furniture design, Stumpf designs products for the Herman Miller Company, a leader in high-end office furniture. Stumpf is best known for codesigning the Aeron chair, perhaps the coolest office chair ever made. But as a writer of books himself (Stumpf, 2000), he knows that furniture can only do so much. “I’m not sure there is a direct correlation between a piece of furniture and productivity,” he said, adding, “I’m sure Herman Miller wouldn’t want to hear me say that” (Grawe, 2005, p. 77).

Specious Barrier 4

“I’m waiting until I feel like it,” aka “I write best when I’m inspired to write.”

This final specious barrier is the most comical and irrational. I hear this one a lot from writers who, for whatever incomprehensible reason, resist making a writing schedule. “My best work comes when I’m inspired,” they say. “It’s no use trying to write when I’m not in the mood. I need to feel like writing.” It’s funny when thwarted writers say this. It’s like cigarette addicts defending cigarettes by saying that smoking relaxes them, even though nicotine withdrawal causes the feelings of tension in the first place (Parrott, 1999). When struggling writers defend their unwillingness to make a schedule, they’re sticking up for the cause of their struggles. If you believe that you should write only when you feel like writing, ask yourself some simple questions: How has this strategy worked so far? Are you happy with how much you write? Do you feel stressed about finding time to write or about completing half-finished projects? Do you sacrifice your evenings and weekends for writing?

It’s easy to demolish this specious barrier: Research has shown that waiting for inspiration doesn’t work. Boice (1990, pp. 79–81) conducted a study with
profound implications for every binge writer who waits for inspiration. He gathered a sample of college professors who struggled with writing, and he randomly assigned them to use different writing strategies. People in an abstinence condition were forbidden from all nonemergency writing; people in a spontaneous condition scheduled 50 writing sessions but wrote only when they felt inspired; and people in a contingency management condition scheduled 50 writing sessions and were forced to write during each session. (They had to send a check to a disliked organization if they didn’t do their writing.) The dependent variables were the number of pages written per day and the number of creative ideas per day. Figure 2.2 shows what Boice found. First, people in the contingency management condition wrote a lot: They wrote 3.5 times as many pages as people in the spontaneous condition and 16 times as much as those in the abstinence condition. People who wrote “when they felt like it” were barely more productive than people told not to write at all—inspiration is overrated. Second, forcing people to write enhanced their creative ideas for writing. The typical number of days between creative ideas was merely 1 day for people who were forced to write; it was 2 days for people in the spontaneous condition and 5 days for people in the abstinence condition. Writing breeds good ideas for writing.

Some kinds of writing are so unpleasant that no normal person will ever feel like doing them. What kind of person feels enthusiastic about writing a grant

FIGURE 2.2. Effects of different writing strategies on (a) the number of pages written per day and (b) the modal number of days between creative writing ideas. Data are from Boice (1990, p. 80).
proposals? Who wakes up in the morning with an urge to write about “Specific Aims” and “Consortium/Contractual Arrangements”? Writing a grant proposal is like doing your taxes, except that you can’t pay your accountant to do it for you. If you have moods where you’re gripped by a desire to read the Department of Health and Human Services Grants.gov Application Guide SF424 (R&R), then you don’t need this book. If you’re like everyone else, though, you’ll need more than “feeling like it” to finish a grant proposal.

Struggling writers who “wait for inspiration” should get off their high horse and join the unwashed masses of real academic writers. The ancient Greeks assigned muses for poetry, music, and tragedy, but they didn’t mention a muse for journal articles written in APA style. As academics, we’re not creating high literature. We don’t have fans lurking outside the conference hotel hoping for our autographs on recent issues of the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin. We do technical, professional writing. Some kinds of academic writing are more relaxed—like textbooks, or perhaps this book—but even those kinds of writing boil down to imparting useful information to your readers. Our writing is important because it’s practical, clear, and idea driven.

Ralph Keyes (2003) has shown that great novelists and poets—people who we think should wait for inspiration—reject the notion of writing when inspired. The prolific Anthony Trollope (1883/1999) wrote that

there are those... who think that the man who works with his imagination should allow himself to wait till—inspiration moves him. When I have heard such doctrine preached, I have hardly been able to repress my scorn. To me it would not be more absurd if the shoemaker were to wait for inspiration, or the tallow-chandler for the divine moment of melting. ... I was once told that the surest aid to the writing of a book was a piece of cobbler’s wax on my chair. I certainly believe in the cobbler’s wax much more than the inspiration. (p. 121)

How do these great writers write instead? Guess. Successful professional writers, regardless of whether they’re writing novels, nonfiction, poetry, or drama, are prolific because they write regularly, usually every day. They reject the idea that they must be in the mood to write. As Keyes (2003) put it, “Serious writers write, inspired or not. Over time they discover that routine is a better friend to them than inspiration” (p. 49). One might say that they make a schedule and stick to it.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has cast a cold, critical eye on some common barriers to writing. We’ve all indulged in these comfort blankets, but it’s hard to type when you’re wrapped in a blanket. If you still cling to any of these specious barriers, reread this chapter until you have been indoctrinated into the glorious wonders of scheduling. This book can’t help you unless you
accept the principle of scheduling, because the only way to write a lot is to write regularly, regardless of whether you feel like writing. Once you have developed a writing schedule, read the next chapter. It describes simple motivational tools for sticking to your schedule and for writing more efficiently.

3

Motivational Tools

The previous chapter demolished some false reasons for not writing. Its message was clear: Write according to a schedule. Schedules are why prolific writers are so prolific, and they are how anyone can write a lot. But perhaps you’re not getting much done during your scheduled time: You sit down, coffee and computer at hand, but you’re not sure what to write. Reformed binge writers usually don’t know how to manage their writing time. Because they used to be driven by deadlines and guilt, they lack experience in setting goals, managing several writing projects at once, and sticking to their schedule. This chapter describes some tools for enhancing your motivation and your writing productivity. These tools presuppose that you’re writing according to a schedule. If you haven’t picked a schedule and committed to it yet, then you can add binge stubbornness to your bingeing repertoire.
SETTING GOALS

Like businesspeople, academics enjoy talking about goals. Some academics are so enamored of goals, initiatives, and strategic plans that they become deans and provosts. Goals deserve the attention they get. Clear goals are directly motivating—they enable people to plan, carry out instrumental actions, and feel proud when the goal has been accomplished (Bandura, 1997). Without clear goals, people’s actions are diffuse and undirected (Lewin, 1935). To write a lot, you need to clarify your writing goals. This isn’t as easy as it sounds; people’s plans often go awry because of inadequate goal setting. Developing the right kinds of goals will make you a more efficient writer.

So how do you set good goals? The first step is to realize that goal setting is part of the process of writing. It’s a good idea to devote a writing session to developing and clarifying your writing goals; I usually do this once a month. Planning is part of writing, so people who write a lot also plan a lot. The second step is to list your project goals—these goals are the individual projects that need to be written. Examples include revising and resubmitting a paper, starting a new manuscript, writing an invited chapter for an edited book, reviving that half-done paper you started last year, developing a grant proposal, and writing a book.

What do you want to write? When reformed binge writers first set writing goals, one project always leaps out—usually the dreaded project they had been avoid-

ing for the past 3 months. Certainly write that goal down, but don’t stop there. What else would you like to write during the next few months? Is there a grant proposal deadline on the horizon? Does your file cabinet have any unpublished experiments that deserve a good peer-reviewed home? Is there a review article that you always meant to write? Put down this book, get some paper, and make a sprawling, discursive list of your project goals.

After you settle on a list of project goals—and it might be a long list—you need to write these goals down. It’s a waste of your writing time to rehash the planning process. Get a whiteboard or bulletin board, put it near your writing space, and proudly display your list of goals. A binge writer would feel anxious when confronted with this long list of projects, but you have a schedule. Binge writers ask, “Will I get all this done?” disciplined writers idly wonder how many weeks it will take to write everything on the list. It’s gratifying to cross a project goal off the list. You can use happy-face stickers if that’s more your style.

The third step is to set a concrete goal for each day of writing. When you sit down during your writing time to work toward a project goal, you need to break the goal into smaller units. “Resubmit that paper” is fine as a project goal, but it’s too broad to be useful when you sit down to write. When you start your writing period, take a couple of moments to think about what you want to accomplish that day. “Write that paper” is too general; you need a concrete goal
for that day. Here are some examples of concrete daily goals:

- Write at least 200 words.
- Print the first draft I finished yesterday, read it, and revise it.
- Make a new list of project goals and write them on my whiteboard.
- Write the first three paragraphs of the general discussion.
- Add missing references and then reconcile the citations and references.
- Reread chapters 22 and 24 from Zinsser (2001) to recharge my writing batteries.
- Finish the “Setting Goals” section that I started yesterday.
- Brainstorm and then make an outline for a new manuscript.
- Reread the reviewers’ comments of my paper and make a list of things to change.
- Correct the page proofs and mail them back.

Some people are surprised by goals that refer to numbers of words or paragraphs. Remember, these are concrete goals. It’s hard to get a foothold into an abstract goal like “revise and resubmit that paper,” but it’s easy to understand how to write at least 200 words—you sit down and type. The irrepressible Anthony Trollope, writing with watch at hand, had the concrete goal of 250 words every 15 minutes (Trollope, 1883/1999). Get in the habit of setting specific, focused, concrete goals for each writing day. They’ll prevent confusion about what to do and how to do it.

**SETTING PRIORITIES**

By now, you have a list of project goals. Of all of these projects, what should you write first? I asked my colleagues who write a lot how they set writing priorities. Here’s a sample list—it’s a rough average between my own priorities and the typical set of priorities. Use it as an example and write down your own priorities, perhaps next to your list of project goals.

1. **Checking page proofs and copyedited manuscripts.** This appears as nearly everyone’s top writing priority, and for good reasons. Checking proofs is the final stage in the process of publishing, and unlike much of the world of academic writing, there’s a firm deadline. Publishers need you to review page proofs and copyedited manuscripts fast, usually within 48 hours. After all the months (or years) spent collecting the data and writing the manuscript, why would you hold up your own paper? Do this fast.

2. **Finishing projects with deadlines.** Most writing tasks lack deadlines, so projects that have a due date should receive priority over those that don’t. Projects with deadlines include invited book chapters, grant proposals, and administrative writing. Some of these deadlines are firm—most grant agencies won’t consider proposals that are a mere day late—
and others are mushier. Personally, I don't have this as a priority category, because I don't rub against deadlines like I used to. If you follow a writing schedule, you'll finish things early. A binge writer's biggest motivator, deadlines are nearly irrelevant to disciplined, scheduled writers.

3. **Revising manuscripts to resubmit to a journal.** Most manuscripts get rejected. If you have the good fortune to be asked to resubmit your paper, don't squander it. Revised manuscripts are closer to publication than new manuscripts, so they should receive higher priority.

4. **Reviewing manuscripts and grant proposals.** This is a controversial category; I found little agreement among my colleagues regarding where reviews should fall in the priority list. Some thought reviews should be a high-priority nonwriting task, one worth doing quickly but not during scheduled writing time. Others were indifferent toward reviews and tended to put them off. For what it's worth, I place reviews relatively high. The peer review process is only as good as the peers who review. The review process in psychology is too slow, and this hurts the field's scientific mission. If everyone were a faster reviewer, everyone would be a happier author. Writing reviews quickly also wins you the goodwill of editors, who are constantly exasperated by slow reviewers. The same holds for grants: A lot is at stake with grant reviews, so they're worth doing quickly and well.

5. **Developing a new manuscript.** Published papers start with the first draft of a manuscript. Writing a manuscript from the ground up is hard for binge writers: They spread it out over months, and they do their literature reviews and data analyses in binges, too. Writing new manuscripts is relatively easy compared with grants, books, and revised manuscripts when you follow a schedule. Chapter 6 gives helpful tips for writing empirical papers.

6. **Doing miscellaneous writing.** This is a catch-all category for unimportant writing that still needs to be done, like a brief article for a newsletter. It helps to have some fun side projects that you can tinker with when you have a lull in your major writing projects.

Nearly everyone I surveyed mentioned that they place particular priority on writing projects involving graduate students. They might usually devote their time to a resubmission, for instance, but they'll privilege a new manuscript when a graduate student is a coauthor. This is sound advice. I also give priority to projects in which I'm a nonwriting coauthor. Ever write a first draft, send it to the second and third authors for comments and changes, and never hear back from them? It's maddening to be held up by a
slow coauthor, especially when he or she doesn't have the burden of generating much text. Binge writing is bad, but binge coauthoring is worse.

Graduate students should have different writing priorities than faculty. This priority list was developed by talking with successful graduate students and recent graduates.

1. **Projects with deadlines.** Graduate school involves a lot of deadline writing, such as required papers for classes and seminars. Many students complain that their class assignments soak up writing time that could be spent on more significant projects, like a master's thesis. That's true, but deadlines are deadlines, and these papers are good practice for the real world of academic writing. Also, if you need more time to write, simply add more hours to your weekly writing schedule. Grant proposals—such as fellowships that support graduate training—also have deadlines, and they're well worth the effort.

2. **Curricular writing.** In graduate school, you'll have writing projects that define your school's degree program: typically a master's thesis, a comprehensive or qualifying paper, and a dissertation. You need to do these to graduate, so do them quickly. These projects sometimes yield publishable products, so many students can integrate their curricular tasks with real professional writing.

3. **Professional publications.** Scientific research counts only if it's published in an accessible, peer-reviewed outlet. It's great that you finished your thesis and that your committee liked it, but the world's scientists need to be able to access it and scrutinize it. Strong theses and dissertations should be submitted to professional journals. Moreover, you should aspire to publish more than your thesis and dissertation. Take every opportunity to get involved in research projects and writing projects. If you make a writing schedule, you'll be the most prolific student in your program.

4. **Other writing.** Graduate students often do a surprising amount of miscellaneous writing, like reviewing books and contributing to bulletins and newsletters. Like all writing, this writing is good practice and worth the time. But these projects are less important than peer-reviewed, archived professional publications such as journal articles and book chapters. If faced with two options, always make professional writing a higher priority.

When we talk about setting priorities, people commonly ask, "But what if I have nothing to write?" It's rare that professors have nothing to write. To the contrary, most faculty I know have a dark, vast backlog of unpublished data. Collecting data is easy; writing about data is hard. If you have experiments that you ran 10 years ago but never published, it'll be a while
before you have nothing to write. Moreover, writing begets writing. As Boice (1990) found, people who wrote regularly had more creative ideas for writing compared with people who wrote only when they felt like it (see Chapter 2). If you think you have nothing to write, spend a writing period making a new set of project goals.

Graduate students, however, can realistically find themselves without a current writing project. Perhaps you just wrapped up your thesis and have no other projects, or perhaps you just started graduate school. Fear not: You have two good options. First, get involved in an ongoing writing project. Your advisor, like most professors, probably struggles with writing and has a few stalled writing projects. Wander into his or her office and say “I’ve been reading some books about how to be a better writer, and one of them suggested wandering into your office and asking if I could get involved in some writing projects. If you have any manuscripts that need work or some data that need to be submitted, I’d like to help out.” There’s a realistic possibility that your advisor will sputter incoherently. Faculty wish that graduate students took more initiative in research and writing, so your advisor will be pleased that you want to get involved.

Another way you can deal with not having anything to write is to use your scheduled writing time for your professional development. One of the best tips I ever got in grad school was to “always make time to think.” Grad school is hectic; it’s easy to lose sight of your long-range goals when you’re struggling to manage a lot of short-term deadlines. Having a few hours to yourself each week will give you time to read books about writing and teaching, to reflect on your research, and to think about your broader career goals.

**Monitoring Progress**

Most people have no idea how much—or how little—they’re writing. Because they view themselves in a flattering, self-enhancing light, most people think that they’re writing more often and more efficiently than they are. To write a lot, you need to take a cold, accurate look at your writing by monitoring your writing progress. Research on self-regulation shows that it isn’t enough to set a goal and make it a priority: People must monitor their progress toward the goal (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Duval & Silvia, 2001).

Monitoring your writing progress has many good motivational effects. First, watching your progress keeps your goals salient, which prevents them from slipping away. Many people struggle with managing all the things they have to write. Monitoring your writing will keep you focused on your ongoing project. Second, merely monitoring your behavior will help you sit down and write. Behavioral research shows that self-observation alone can cause the desired behaviors (see Korotitsch & Nelson-Gray, 1999). For example, people who want to save money should keep track of their daily expenses, because the mere tracking
of their spending will make them spend less. Likewise, people who want to write regularly should keep track of whether they sat down and wrote: Typing a big ugly zero in a spreadsheet when you miss a writing period is oddly motivating. Finally, monitoring your writing will help you set better goals. After a while, you’ll have enough data on yourself to make realistic estimates of how long it will take to write something. Better goal setting, in turn, leads to more productive writing.

People who write a lot typically do some kind of monitoring. There are different ways to do this; in this section I describe how I monitor my writing. When I tell people about my system they give me an odd look, as if I had just said that I make quilts out of Bernese mountain dog hair. The system sounds nerdy, obsessive, and weird, but it helps me stay focused. I have an SPSS data file called “Writing Progress.sav”; Figure 3.1 gives a screenshot of the file. I created variables for the month, date, day of the week, and year. These variables let me identify a given day. The essential variables are called words, goal, and project. In the words column, I enter the number of words I wrote that day. Any word processor will give you the number of words in your document; just get this number before you start and after you finish, and you can take the difference. Notice that this column has a lot of empty cells. As I’ve emphasized, writing involves many tasks, not just generating text. Some days I spend reading articles, filling out forms for a grant proposal, or rereading a
manuscript that needs to be resubmitted. I leave the cell blank for these days. The purpose of the goal column is to mark whether I met my writing goal for that day. My personal goal is simply to sit down and do something that furthers my project goal, so I score this variable as \(0 = \text{Unmet}, 1 = \text{Met}\). I did pretty well during the period shown in Figure 3.1; I failed to meet my goal on July 5, but I met it on the other days. The project column describes the project goal I worked on that day. Recording the project lets you see how long it took to finish a project. Sometimes it feels like a project drags on forever, but it may have been briefer than you remember.

Binge writers who are still clinging to spurious barriers might say “But I don’t have SPSS,” or even “But I use SAS!” Any statistics or spreadsheet program will do, and I’m sure you have access to lined notebook paper and pencils. The tracking is the key, not the technology. But a statistics program lets you mine your writing data. If you’re a statistics fan—and who isn’t?—you’ll love the ability to get statistics about your writing. I wrote a short SPSS syntax file that computes some descriptive statistics and histograms. When I spent a period writing new text, I averaged 789 words per day; Figure 3.2 shows a histogram. It doesn’t sound like a lot, but it adds up. Figure 3.3 plots goal by month; this figure shows that some months were better than others. According to my writing data, I sat down to write on 97% of my scheduled days during the past 12 months. I’m not perfect, but I’m pretty happy with that number. Monitoring it lets me try to improve it, and I feel proud when I get 100% for the month. If you’re curious, you could also plot goal and words data by day of the week. So, when people ask me how much I write, I can say I write 97% of the weekdays, and when I generate text I average 789 words per day. They might give me the Bernese-mountain-dog-quilt look, but that’s okay.
FIGURE 3.3. A histogram of the proportion of times the daily writing goal was met over the past 12 months.

Reward yourself when you finish a project goal. Self-reinforcement and contingency management are time honored ways of fostering desirable behaviors (Skinner, 1987). When you submit a paper or grant proposal, buy yourself a nice cup of coffee, a good lunch, or a vintage Heywood-Wakefield end table. Writing’s rewards are delayed—it takes months to hear from journal editors and grant panels—so immediate self-rewards will sustain your motivation. Only a fool, however, rewards productive writing with skipping a scheduled writing period. Never reward writing with not writing. Rewarding writing by abandoning your schedule is like rewarding yourself for quitting smoking by having a cigarette. The writing schedule works by harnessing the awesome powers of routine and habit: Don’t lose your good writing habits.

WHAT ABOUT WRITER’S BLOCK?

“Wait,” you might say. “So far, this book hasn’t said anything about writer’s block. Sure, you can make a schedule, set goals, and monitor your progress, but what happens when you get writer’s block?” I love writer’s block. I love it for the same reasons I love tree spirits and talking woodland creatures—they’re charming and they don’t exist. When people tell me they have writer’s block, I ask, “What on earth are you trying to write?” Academic writers cannot get writer’s block. Don’t confuse yourself with your friends teaching creative writing in the fine arts department. You’re not crafting a deep narrative or composing metaphors that expose mysteries of the human heart. The subtlety of your analysis of variance will not move readers to tears, although the tediousness of it might. People will not photocopy your reference list and pass it out to friends whom they wish to inspire. Novelists and poets are the landscape artists and portrait painters; academic writers are the people with big paint sprayers who repaint your basement.

Writer’s block is a good example of a dispositional fallacy: A description of behavior can’t also explain the described behavior. Writer’s block is nothing more
than the behavior of not writing. Saying that you can’t write because of writer’s block is merely saying that you can’t write because you aren’t writing. It’s trivial. The cure for writer’s block—if you can cure a specious affliction—is writing. Recall Boice’s (1990) experiment described in chapter 2. In that study, struggling writers wrote a lot when they simply followed a schedule—that’s all it took. In contrast, struggling writers who waited until they “felt like it” wrote almost nothing. If you really have writer’s block, you can (a) stop working on your Collected Poems and get back to writing your journal article, (b) persuade the tree spirits and talking woodland creatures to write

your general discussion for you, or (c) redevelop your writing schedule and recommit to sticking to it.

Just as aliens abduct only people who believe in alien abductions, writer’s block strikes only writers who believe in it. One of the great mysteries of the writing schedule system—a spooky mystery, in fact—is that scheduled writers don’t get writer’s block, whatever that is. Prolific writers follow their writing schedule regardless of whether they feel like writing. Some days they don’t write much—writing is a grim business, after all—but they’re nevertheless sitting and writing, oblivious to the otherworldly halo hovering above their house.

**Conclusions**

This chapter has described motivational tools that will make you a more productive writer. After you’ve committed to a writing schedule, you need to make a list of your project goals and write them down. When you sit down to write, spend a minute thinking about what you want to do that day. Setting priorities among your project goals will take the stress out of managing several projects at once. And monitoring your writing will keep you focused on your goals, motivate you not to miss a day, inform you about how well you’re doing, and give you hard facts that you can show to your binge-writing colleagues who are doubters and unbelievers. Anyone who combines the tips in this chapter with a regular schedule will write a lot.