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Don't write on Fridays! My reflection on reading and writing*

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I must start my reflection on writing with a few words on reading. I was lucky to grow up in a household with many books. My first love was an illustrated children's dictionary. I spent many hours looking at every detail, imagining how people slept in the bunk beds in the large sailing ship in the picture and what it would feel like to sleep under a palm tree. I made up stories about the penguins that ate fish on the page about Antarctica.

In elementary school, I discovered stories made of words, and my hunger for new stories could no longer be satisfied with the books in our house. During the school year, I took out books from the school library. During summer holidays, I walked down the hill to the town library every morning, returning the book I had borrowed the day before and picking out a new one. In the afternoons, I sat in the garden and read. Why I didn't make my endeavour more efficient – such as by borrowing a whole week's worth of books as an analogue version of what we would now call bulk downloads – I no longer know. Perhaps the books would have been too heavy for me to carry. More likely, the daily trip down the hill to the library and back was an essential part of my reading: during that time, I connected the stories from the books with my own life. I wondered whether I would have been as brave as the heroes and heroines of the story. I imagined how the people in the country I was reading about lived. What did their school look like? What pets did the children have?

What I got out of reading made me aware of how much responsibility those of us who write actually carry. That producing corporate, soulless writing is the equivalent of serving stale and loveless food to our families and friends. That careful and spirited writing, in contrast, can change the mental landscape of our readers, and perhaps help them to change the world around them.

My own first attempts at writing were stories scribbled in a lined blue notebook, with the fountain pen we had to use in school. I do not remember the plots of my stories, but I do recall that the protagonists were all girls that tried to figure out the world. At age 12, during

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a long illness in the winter, and with the help of a booklet that had come with my father's electronic typewriter, I taught myself touch typing. Being able to touch type changed everything. I found the process of putting pen on paper much more tedious than letting my fingers run over a keyboard. When I touch type, I can observe the world. I can look out of the window, watch the comings and goings in a coffee shop, or look at the person speaking during a meeting – and write at the same time.

When I entered university, we did not yet have laptops. I used pens to write in notebooks, but I much preferred to be home with my computer. The invention of laptops has been a huge improvement for me. I sometimes use voice recognition software to transfer my thoughts into words when I am travelling. But sitting somewhere with my laptop is still my favourite way to write.

As a doctoral student, and during my post-doctoral years, writing was the core activity of my working day. Not that I wrote for many hours – I spent much more time researching, debating and doing other things – but I felt that writing was the most important activity of all. When I took up my first teaching post, I found it increasingly difficult to find the time to write. I became anxious about it, and I asked friends for advice.

Then, in 2008, a colleague recommended a book: *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing* by Paul Silvia. I ordered the book online and read it on a trip to a conference. Don't wait for inspiration to find you!, Silvia said. Writing should be built into our everyday routine, not a task reserved for moments of creativity.[1] The author also gave a lot of practical advice, such as writing every day, setting specific quantifiable goals and tracking these carefully. I do not remember all of the details, but I will never forget how Silvia demystified the writing process for me. I started to see text as a process rather than a product. I decided that on the Monday following the conference, I would start a new writing routine: I would write a set number of words every working day, first thing in the morning.

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1 P J Silvia, *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing* (American Psychological Association 2007). Since I have started using this method and talking to students and colleagues about it, I have been made aware of other books on writing that give similar advice, most importantly Pressfield 2002 and Belcher 2009: S Pressfield, *The War of Art: Break through the Blocks and Win your Inner Creative Battles* (Black Irish Entertainment LLC 2002); W Belcher, *Writing your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success* (University of Chicago Press 2009). With the help of colleagues who sent their suggestions I curated a list of books and articles on good academic writing: B Prainsack, 'Writing well in the social sciences: recommended readings' (26 December 2019) (this guide focuses less on writing routines, but on writing style).

And I did. With very few exceptions, and with a pause of one year, 2017, during which I tried to write as little as possible,[2] I have been writing at least 200 words every working day since 2008. I have helped students and colleagues to overcome writing blocks and supported some very busy people in fitting writing into their daily lives. Thanks to Paul Silvia and years of trying out his approach, I have developed a writing method that works. *Always*. I call it the *Don't write on Fridays* approach. If you struggle with writing, or you know someone who does, the only thing that this method requires is that all of the seven rules are followed – and not just ones that seem most palatable. Then it will work – guaranteed! Here it is.

RULE 1: WRITE EVERY (WORKING) DAY

As Silvia said, writing needs to be done regularly, not once a week. Those who keep Fridays free for writing probably know what I am talking about: it takes two hours to get back into the process, and before you have made much progress, time has ran out. You leave your desk frustrated and don't particularly look forward to next Friday, when you plan to write again. You associate writing with disappointment, also because it takes ages before you get a paper done. There are good reasons for this, of course – our days don't have enough hours for us to do everything that we need to do. It is easy to bump the task that is least urgent farthest down the priority list, only to elevate it to the top of that list when the submission deadline is approaching.

Those who write every day, in contrast, don't need any time to get into writing – they never get out of it. And what's best, their unconscious sometimes solves problems for them. After years of following this method, I don't get upset anymore when I have a bad writing day, or get stuck in a problem. I trust that tomorrow, I'll get unstuck.

RULE 2: QUANTIFY

It is key to write a predetermined number of words each day. If you are new to this method, choose a small number – 200 words, the length of an abstract, is a good goalpost. If this sounds very little, you will be surprised how much you get done if you write 200 words every day! In extremely busy periods, you can make the time to write your 200 words by getting up 20 minutes earlier, or

2 The reason for this was that I had finished several large writing projects in the year before, and I felt empty. I did carry out small pieces of writing that year, such as revising papers or writing text in connection with my teaching, but I tried to do as much as I could orally, rather than in writing. This involved asking my students to send me voice messages rather than email. That part of the experiment did not go so well.

by working on a part of your text that is easier to write (for some, it is the methods section of their research paper, for others it is the part of the argument that they feel most confident about). In quieter periods, the 200 words target will ensure that you have sufficient time for data analysis and other research tasks – or even for some time of relaxed reading.

Whatever your writing goal is, never remain below the target. I think it was Silvia who said that if a sentence ends one word short of your goal, you must write another sentence. You should never move on to your next task without having reached your writing goal in full. Having said this, you should not go much over target either (see rule #5).

RULE 3: WRITE FIRST THING IN THE MORNING

It does not matter whether you are an early bird or a night owl: among all the work-related tasks in the day, writing should be the first. In this manner you will reach your writing goal early in the day, which protects you from the nagging sound of dissatisfaction and frustration when you've ended another day without writing because so many urgent tasks derailed your plans. You will start the day with a sense of achievement.

RULE 4: PUT IT IN YOUR CALENDAR

Whether you have a paper diary or an electronic one, block the time that you will need to reach your writing goal in your diary. It creates a sense of commitment towards yourself and also others. Your colleagues can't make appointments with you when you have one with yourself (whether you can be honest and call it 'writing time', or whether you need to camouflage it as something else, depends on how understanding and supportive your workplace is – a place with a good academic work culture will celebrate those who protect time for writing).

Initially, you may not know how much time you should block for writing, especially when you are new to this method. I normally block half an hour for each 200 words – but this depends very much on the type of writing that we do. You may need more or less time than I do. If you can, err on the side of blocking too much time rather than too little, to avoid writing in a rush. After a few weeks of following this method, you will know what amount of time is right for you.

Do not, however, replace the set number of words with a time goal. Stick with a predetermined number of words, ideally between 200 and 500 a day. One of the secrets of this method is to avoid

sitting in front of an empty page and buying time by 'thinking', or answering that urgent email, just to avoid writing. If you feel tired and uninspired, write some tired and uninspired words – as long as you reach your writing goal.

RULE 5: NEVER TAKE MORE THAN ONE WORKING DAY OFF WRITING

This rule does not mean that you should never go on a holiday. On the contrary, scheduled breaks from writing are extremely important. Rather than driving you into overwork, this rule applies only to the days on which you have scheduled writing. There will be days where the 200 or 300 words that you have planned to write will feel like a struggle. On other days your writing will go so smoothly that you don't want to stop. Feeling that you are just in the right head space, and because you may have a bit more time than usual, you may end up writing 700 or 1000 words instead of the 200 you had aimed for. In that case, you can skip the writing that you had planned for the next day. *But please don't skip more than one day!* One of the reasons that this writing method is so effective is that you never really get out of the writing process. Writing every working day ensures that your mind will keep working through the problems that you are trying to solve even when you are not consciously thinking about them. Taking longer breaks too often will get you closer to the 'Writing on Fridays' model – and avoiding the downfalls of that is the point of the exercise.

For me, the ideal number of writing days per week is five. I schedule writing Mondays to Fridays. I have had times when I also wrote on Sundays, when I had to finalise a large writing project or when I took on new writing projects at short notice. It did not work very well for me, and I now try to avoid it. At the same time, I have found that writing four days a week over longer periods is not ideal, either. The only time when I schedule only four days of writing is when I am at a conference or when there are other reasons why I really, really can't write on a particular week day.

RULE 6: EDITING TEXT IS THE ONLY ACTIVITY THAT CAN REPLACE WRITING IN THIS METHOD

In other words, you should write, revise, or edit every (working) day. Doing fieldwork or reading – as important as these things are – do not count as writing. Also when you revise or edit, the quantification rule (#2) applies, meaning that you should set yourself an editing goal in terms of a set number of pages.

For my own writing, I normally set myself the goal of two pages in the first round of revising and editing, then four to five pages in the second round, and then up

to 10 pages for editing relatively polished text (that, at this point, I know so well that it does not take me long to get through 10 pages).

RULE 7: CELEBRATE YOUR SUCCESSES

My source of inspiration, Paul Silvia, said that those who write a lot will get a lot of rejections – but eventually also get our work accepted. Although I still hurt when my work gets rejected by a journal or a publisher, I now get over it relatively quickly. What has also helped is to celebrate the successes. When I had a less busy job than I have now, I celebrated each accepted paper by taking a day off work. I don't have the flexibility to do this in my current job, but I still celebrate successes – by going out to dinner with my partner, or doing something that I do not normally do during a work week. When my doctoral students or post-doctoral colleagues get a paper accepted, I take them out for lunch or for drinks.

I did not know that this is where my reflection on writing would take me when I started. I hope that some readers will find it useful, and that those of you who do not need any help with writing do not feel disrespected. If you write one day a week, and it works for you, that's great – even if it is on Fridays. The method I describe here is for people who struggle carving out sufficient time for writing and for those suffering from writer's block. Since starting with this method I have never had a writer's block because I have felt that words on paper are part of a journey. They aren't necessarily there to stay, but they are there to get me – or other people – moving. The words can change in the process, and so do we.

At the end, let me return to reading for a few moments. I don't know whether it is because I am getting older and time becomes more precious, or if it is because the average quality of writing is deteriorating (see also Hilgartner 2024).[3] I am becoming pickier and more impatient with my reading. When I was younger, opening a book or even a paper was like a social encounter with the author: common courtesy would require that we don't walk out in the middle of a conversation, even if it is not the most spirited one. I do walk out now. I abandon books halfway and skip whole

3 Hilgartner S, 'Chats between bots: a real-world experiment in writing, recursion, and reflectivity' forthcoming in Brice Laurant and Sebastian Pfotenhauer (eds), *Handbook on Living Labs and Real-World Experiments* (Edward Elgar 2024).

sections in academic papers.[4] At the same time, I cherish good writing – and there is still so much of it! Not only fiction, but also academic writing. Some of the best academic writing happens when the writer takes you on a journey of discovery. You feel the excitement and the vulnerability at the same time. Much is lost when academic institutions and their rewards systems make researchers feel that there is no time space for these things – that writing must be technical and overconfident. Let's resist!

4 I am conscious that there are people telling us that this is how papers are meant to be read, but I never liked it. And no, I don't mean the wonderful Trish Greenhalgh, whose advice on 'how to read a paper' I highly recommend: see T Greenhalgh, *How to Read a Paper: The Basics of Evidence-Based Medicine* 6th edn (Wiley-Blackwell [1997] 2019).