Northern Ireland
Legal Quarterly
Vol 77 RWS (2026) 27–39
Reflections DOI: 10.53386/nilq.v77iRWS.1292

Why do we get stuck in academic writing?*

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INTRODUCTION

After I was invited to contribute to this series of Reflections on Writing – to promote dialogue on why we write and how we write – it took me some time to settle on a question that seems to take us in the opposite direction: why are we not talking about why we are *not* writing? I firmly believe that this question needs to form part of this series. This is because I am confident in making the assertion – completely without empirical support beyond personal experience – that vast swathes of academics have experienced *stuckness* with their writing at multiple stages of their career. Indeed, I wager that this has been a major problem for the majority of us at one time or another. I am much less confident, however, about how accurate my diagnosis might be of the root causes of stuckness and even less sure that my thoughts on tackling the issue will have widespread therapeutic effect for readers. I therefore apologise in advance for any hint of hubris in what follows. Humbly, I merely offer you some insights from my own (sometimes painful) experiences of being an academic writer for over 30 years. My focus here is on one's own writing. I leave comment on collaborative writing for another time.

This contribution proceeds as follows. In section 2, I explore the question: what am I stuck on? The discussion distinguishes between internal and external forces that produce feelings of stuckness. Section 3 asks: why do I become stuck? This section differentiates between being stuck *about* writing itself as opposed to being stuck *within* the writing process on a given topic. I invite readers to engage in some deep personal reflection about how we approach our writing, what the process requires of us, and what it triggers within us. Finally, section 4 asks: how can I become unstuck? Here, I do not naively suggest that a permanent state of unstuckness is attainable. Rather, I offer some pointers on recognising forms of stuckness for what they are, and I suggest ways of managing them (and ourselves) throughout the writing process.

* First published in NILQ 76.RS (2025) 27–39 on 6 March 2025.

WHAT AM I STUCK ON?

We are wont to talk about the writing process without really examining what this *process* entails. For one thing, it begins well in advance of any actual writing. The process begins with the kernel of an idea, and in academic terms that idea needs to be shaped into a coherent research problem to be tackled, which in turns requires the formulation of a top-level research question about the problem – or an interconnected set of research questions – that will be answered through the application of an appropriate research method. All of this must be reflected in the actual writing itself, to produce a tangible output in the form of an article, a chapter, a report, a monograph etc.

But, for me, the writing process also extends far beyond the production of any single output. I believe very passionately in the importance of developing and honing one's own Research Voice over time and through a burgeoning portfolio of our academic work. We might do this in any number of ways, from becoming known as an expert on a specific topic or set of related topics, to offering a particular perspective on said topics in our field which considerably enriches the literature, and/or for taking a sustained and critically reflective stand within our domain. As a dear colleague of mine has often said:[1] if I checked out one of your publications from the library and it had no name on it, how would I know it was your work? Each of us must answer this in our own way; and this is what I mean by developing our Research Voice.

So, when I ask 'What am I stuck on?' a crucial first step to answering this question is to reflect on where I am in the writing process. Am I struggling to come up with a sufficiently original idea? Or, am I struggling to articulate the research problem in a way that reflects what is already known in the existing literature and yet communicates why this piece of writing is needed and will be valuable? Or, am I facing a structural challenge of making the research problem flow to well-constructed research questions supported by a sound method? Or, am I failing to deliver sufficient originality and significance from my contribution? This, I call the *So What? Question*. After all the thinking, research and writing, how can we avoid a reader simply reacting: *So What?* Or, am I stuck about being true to my Research Voice? This last question forces us to reflect both on the nature of our cumulative contributions to our field and also to ask: what is my academic legacy going to be? I return to this point in section 4.

To continue for now with the present topic, all of these are questions for internal resolution alone; that is, only we can answer

1 My sincere thanks to Niamh Nic Shuibhne who has been my peer reviewer, critical friend and wonderful friend-friend over the years. And that goes for this article too.

them for ourselves. But in asking them we can, at least, locate ourselves at a particular juncture within the writing process. And this is the first step in understanding our stuckness.

But external forces are also in play. Nobody familiar with contemporary academia needs an explanation of the soul-crushing demands on our time from the ever-expanding contours of the world of the academic. Teaching (and teaching preparation), administration (and the mission creep of bureaucracy), student support (and the explosion in special circumstances), marking (and the invidious influence of ChatGPT et al), impact (for scholars required to demonstrate real world influence of their research) and promotions (the arcane conundrum of what needs to be done at which point in one's career, for how long, and to what extent ...). We do not have control over these aspects that make up the job of 'academic'. Undeniably, they devour our time. But we do have control over our attitude towards them and, crucially, we must accept that we are 100 per cent responsible for how we manage the relationship between them and our own research and writing.

From this, I suggest that in order to begin to answer the question, 'What am I stuck on?', we must first diagnose the nature of the problem of stuckness that we face: is this an internal issue that we are experiencing about the writing process, or is it an external influence robbing us of the necessary time to research and write? Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive and the reasons for our stuckness are often multiple and compounding. But, before we can begin a process of unstuckness, we need to understand why we are stuck because the strategies for unsticking ourselves are multiple and varied. Moreover, as I discuss further below, different strategies are required at different stages of our career.

On external pressures, it is all too easy to become overwhelmed by all the parts of the job that are not research because they are highly time-sensitive in ways that research is not. Of course, there are research and writing deadlines, but these are very fluid in academia as any journal editor or compiler of an edited collection will testify! The deadlines for all other parts of the job are either non-negotiable or come with immediate and profound consequences if they are missed. Rarely is the same true for research and writing. As a result, it is all too easy to be driven by the imperative to meet the red-line deadlines, and research and writing invariably suffer. But given the incomparable nature of the tasks when seen as a series of deadlines, I suggest that we need to think about the job holistically and not in terms of deadlines.

I propose instead that we think in terms of our finite time and how we manage that time relative to what our priorities are. The research and writing process

takes an inordinately long amount of time. As a thought experiment, consider the following: if we make our research the top priority, how much time do we estimate the next writing project will require to deliver on all aspects of the writing process? Think about breaking that process down into bite-size tasks – refining the core idea as original and significant; articulating the research problem well; situating the problem within existing literature (has it been done before/where am I adding value?); drafting robust and well-designed research questions; specifying what type of research is required to answer the questions and how it is to be conducted; developing an appropriate method; estimating time for the research itself; estimating time for deep thinking with the research results; writing up; refining and honing; revising the research problem and questions – are these right for what has been found out?; what revisions of approach or substance are required?; testing the work and seeking feedback before submission; and, finally, tackling the entire submission and peer review process.

This exercise is valuable in numerous respects. First, it gives an overall sense of how much time we require to protect in order to deliver on this research project. All other time devoted to all other tasks must first accommodate this research time commitment. Second, we have started to eat the elephant, so to speak – ie we cannot expect to devour the pachyderm in one sitting; we must proceed in bite-size chunks and measure progress from there. And third, this exercise re-orients our mindset from being deadline-driven to focusing on time management. It forces us to confront the reality of how much time it takes to go from idea to output, to appreciate how much work is needed and to recognise that the 'actual writing' is just one part of a much more extended process. Done well, this exercise is empowering: my research is a top priority and it will require X amount of time. For all other tasks, this leaves Y amount of time. I will plan for and execute those tasks accordingly.

I have three final points to make about this approach. First, this strategy only works if we make a commitment to ourselves to protect research time, and this must be non-negotiable. Equally, as the above exercise suggests, we do not need to protect vast tracts of time in order to make research progress. Understanding where we are in the writing process, and which is the next immediate task, helps us to make steady, consistent progress. To my mind, this is infinitely preferable to 'taking the summer to write' and losing focus and control of our time. As in all other areas of life, incremental consistency of effort is ultimately far more effective for progress than waiting for enough time to make the next big leap forward, which oftentimes never comes.

Secondly, our aspirations for a given piece of writing are inherently tied to how much time we should devote to any one project. It matters very much whether our idea has potential to become truly outstanding in terms of its original and significant contribution to a field, as opposed to an output that might be a reaction to a latest development, say in case law, and which can at best make an incremental contribution to our collective understanding. The UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) uses a star rating (4* down to unclassified) to benchmark all outputs across all fields in all departments in all UK universities. These are generalisable descriptors of quality. And, while there is much to criticise about the REF exercise itself, the descriptors are very useful as a benchmark for every researcher to ask: what level of contribution am I seeking to make with this particular output? It is very unrealistic (and unnecessary) for any of us to imagine that all of our outputs will be 4* and 'world-leading'. And they do not need to be. Sometimes (indeed, often), a 2* or 3* contribution might be all that is required for you to give effect to your Research Voice on a given matter. If so, one must calibrate dedicated time accordingly. This is not to deny the pressures of REF and the push from departments to deliver a submission replete with 3* and 4* outputs. We all need a respectable level of contribution in this regard. But, from the perspective of the individual researcher seeking to develop a portfolio of publications over time, to hone their Research Voice, and to leave a lasting intellectual legacy in their field, it is incredibly helpful to ask of each and every writing project – what is my *ness expectation for this piece? This then directly informs the necessary time commitment. It can also free up time when, for example, we decide that a quick-and-punchy response piece is all that is required. Get it out and move on.

The third point is about guilt. Many of us feel guilty about protecting research time. It is not at all clear why this is so, but it is undoubtedly a widespread phenomenon in academia. There can be few other professions where taking time to do up to 40 per cent of one's job provokes feelings of culpability. By the same token, there are others in our profession who go to the opposite extreme, neglecting the other 60 per cent of the job because they are 'focusing on their research'. Neither is an example of responsible time management. For good or ill, academia is messy and our year is incredibly uneven. No one will manage our time for us. Prioritising time for research is crucial, and that should be guilt-free; but not at the expense of the other parts of the job.

I do recognise that academia is messy in multiple ways. There is the messiness of the moment – such as the overwhelming semester that leaves us feeling that we are drowning – and there is also the messy 'lumpiness' of having a

career in academia. Being an early career researcher (ECR) is harder now than ever before. There are so many demands on the time of an ECR and a combination of pressure to get on and inexperience of knowing when to say 'No' can create a perfect storm that wreaks havoc on research plans. My advice here is to cultivate a trusted mentor who can help you navigate the waters of these early days. Also, learn the power of No and how to distinguish between the 'Hard No' (not now, not ever) and the 'Soft No' (not now, but maybe later). As for the mid and later career academic, the messiness of our trajectory manifests in different ways. A common feature of later-stage academe – especially when we are supposed to be 'professing' – is the *chapter scourge* phenomenon.[2] An invitation to speak at an event or a conference is often tied to an obligation to contribute to a follow-up volume or a special issue in a journal. There are also invitations to contribute to edited collections which are good initiatives in principle, but in practice can become graveyards where great ideas go to die. Our response to such invitations is another opportunity to engage the Hard No/Soft No option. It is also a paradigm example of where reflection of the *ness of our contribution becomes crucial. If I am only willing to deliver a 2* contribution, then I must make this clear to editors from the outset. And, in terms of our own career trajectory, we must reflect on how any contribution to which we agree enhances our Research Voice while only committing the requisite amount of time necessary to deliver accordingly. And sometimes it is ok to say: I have nothing sufficiently new to say.

WHY DO I BECOME STUCK?

I have suggested above that it is helpful to identify whether our stuckness is because of external and/or internal forces. I now want to offer a further distinction between being stuck *about* writing and being stuck *with* our writing. In the former case, I have deliberately omitted the possessive pronoun because I believe this helps us to frame more accurately what is at stake. 'Writing' can feel like a monumental – sometimes insurmountable – task because of all that it requires to be done well and because of what it can come to represent as a feature of our careers and, at times, a reflection of ourselves. The very notion of beginning a new writing project is daunting because it is a commitment for the long-haul. Academia does not lend itself to the stream of consciousness writing style, pioneered by Virginia Woolf (although see 'noodling', below). It requires an upfront and extended commitment of time and resources set against an uncertain

2 My thanks to NNS for this terminology.

prospect of success at peer review or among a readership. This can impact significantly on motivation in getting started and keeping going, as well as generating fear about putting oneself 'out there'. This, in turn, can spawn protracted procrastination about beginning (which, itself, is a fear response) and/or a misplaced perfectionism that is the enemy of completion. How often have we told our PhD candidates that the only good PhD is a finished PhD? And then, how often do we fail to apply that aphorism to ourselves?

In a further reflection of the overwhelming nature of modern academia, we can easily fall into the trap of displacement activity: I am so busy this week/month/semester with [... *insert non-writing academic task here* ...] that I simply cannot find the time to write. But it is never a question of finding the time. In life, we make time for what is important to us. If we are not making that time, this tells us something profound about our priorities. This is as true in friendships as it is in academic writing. All of this is to say that we should not fetishise 'writing' as a part of our professional lives.

The challenges are different when we are stuck *with* our writing. We can become stuck at any (and every?) stage of the writing process outlined above. Good academic writing begins with great ideas. But where do our ideas come from? Who or what inspires us? Personally, I find it helpful to think in terms of the stubborn research problems that perpetually and profoundly annoy me in my field. If I can articulate a research problem within a sub-topic of my field, and if I can demonstrate to myself why I believe that the problem has not been sufficiently tackled in the extant literature, then I am well on the path to designing a new research project. It is the identification and articulation of why this research problem is a stubborn one, for me, that helps me to overcome initial inertia and potential early-stage stuckness.

From there, I think it is also very important to make explicit for ourselves and our readers, what kind of contribution our output is seeking to make to the literature. For example, is this an article about distilling patterns in the jurisprudence of black letter law, or about pointing out missteps in judicial reasoning with potential longer-term consequences? Or is this a conceptual contribution that is suggesting we need to think about the problem in an entirely new way? Or does empirical research bring new data to our understanding of the problem, and if so in what ways do such insights head off the *So What Question?*

It is here that I find the role of the Abstract to be a potential game-changer. Oftentimes, we tend to leave the Abstract to the end of the writing process, almost like an after-thought and simply a summary of the writing work that has already been done. However, I have come to appreciate its role quite differently over the years.

Generally, good quality, effective writing is concise, making every sentence count. George Orwell, in his essay 'Why I write' (1946),[3] speaks about the value of precision and clarity of language. He talks about his own attempts to write '… less picturesquely and more exactly…' – towards a truthfulness in the attempt to reach one's audience.

The academic Abstract is the perfect example of this. To initiate a project, first write its Abstract. This should outline the stubborn research problem, the research questions that fall out from this, the idea that you have to 'solve' the problem, the method to be used, the central analysis, and the reach and the limits of the overall contribution in terms of its originality and significance. This can, and must, be refined as the work progresses, but its value supports that process too – revisiting the Abstract throughout the writing process (and revising accordingly) not only helps us to keep on track but it demonstrates a degree of progress in our thinking and our work. On days and weeks when writing feels too much like a chore, revisiting the Abstract can still represent a very important morsel in the exercise of eating the entire elephant. Moreover, it acts as a compass in navigating the new intellectual territory being explored through our work.

A crucial part of academic writing is situational: where does my work fit in with the existing literature? I find it helpful to think of the works already in the public domain as a slice of Swiss cheese – many areas are covered, but where are the holes? If these holes are research problems, then how can I describe the hole that I seek to fill in? How far across the literature does the hole extend? How important is it to the integrity of the cheese slice? Do we, perhaps, need to create more holes? For me, this metaphor helps to refine the writing project and to inform the writing process itself.

My own attitude to the academic writing process improved dramatically when I started to bring lessons from my personal life to my professional world. At the age of 50, I began to learn the cello. It had been an ambition throughout my adult life, but I was too scared (of what others might think), I was too conceited (to become a beginner at something so late in life), I was too busy (which actually meant, I simply did not make the time), and I felt too overwhelmed (this is such an enormous project and I have no clue where to begin). But I did it. I started. And it was awful. I felt stupid; I felt humiliated to play for people; I felt everyone was better than me; I felt everyone was making more progress than I was; and it felt all too easy to give up. But I did not give up. And the best lesson that I learned was this: you can never break down a task into small enough parts. If you cannot play the whole piece, focus on the difficult passage. If that is too

3 Available via The Orwell Foundation: 'Why I write'.

difficult, slow it down. If that does not work, just play one bar of music. And if that is still beyond you, focus on one or two key notes. Master those, take the win, and build up from there. It is not that you cannot do it. You simply cannot do it, *yet*.

I now use this strategy in my academic writing. If I am stuck on a section, then I focus on the individual paragraphs. If I am stuck on paragraphs, then I look at the level of sentences. If the sentences are not working, I step back again and look at structure. It does not matter how small the task becomes so long as there is some progress. I tell myself that it is not time worry yet about the bigger picture and the longer-term goal. Progress is progress and it is to be celebrated whenever, and however, it is made.

An opposing strategy can also be drawn from music, which is the practice known as ‘noodling’. To noodle is to play one’s instrument freely, experimentally, and without regards for a score or a predetermined sequence of notes. In similar fashion, it can sometimes help to free one’s self of the formal constraints of academic writing and just ... write. Let it bubble out of you as long as the words keep coming. They can be corralled into an academic formalistic style and structure in due course. The objective of this technique is to promote ‘flow’ – the experience of being fully immersed in a task and unconstrained. Those who are interested in the psychology of flow can read more at source: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (1975).[4] It is an amazing state of mind to experience.

Towards the end of the writing process, we will often see our old friend Perfectionism raise its impeccably groomed head. This is to be welcomed if it supports the refinement of our arguments, the articulation of the nature of our originality and/or the depth of the significance of what we are saying, and certainly if it helps to tighten the rigour of our methods and the shape of the output overall. But Perfectionism that cloaks fear dressed up as a commitment to quality must be resisted at all costs. We would never permit this in our PhD candidates, so why tolerate it in ourselves?

If we fear the reaction of readers, then anticipate their objections in our writing. If we fear missing a development in the literature, then deploy suitable caveats. If we fear that we have got the issue ‘wrong’, take comfort that we can always change our minds in a future publication. Our Research Voice should never be static and blindly unwavering; we have the power (and the duty) to change our minds if better analysis and arguments are put forward in the public domain. But this will never happen if we fear entering the public domain ourselves.

4 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (Jossey-Bass 1975).

HOW CAN I BECOME UNSTUCK?

Let us begin to tackle this last question by continuing the examination of the challenges of perfectionism. It can be easy to demonise perfectionism and even cast it as a character flaw in an author, but there are many drivers of perfectionism that align extremely well with the goals of academia; these include, a commitment to high standards, a desire to make a meaningful impact in the field and beyond, and a source of next-level creativity through the contributions that we make. In her book, *The Perfectionist's Guide to Losing Control* (2023),[5] Katherine Morgan Schafler challenges the caricature of perfectionism as the enemy of productivity and instead suggests that we embrace the concept of 'adaptive excellence' that honours high standards while acknowledging the inherent messiness of the human condition. This applies very well to the writing process. Instead of allowing perfectionism to cripple our actions through excessive criticism, Morgan Schafler encourages us to distinguish between 'destructive criticism' and 'constructive feedback', something all academics benefit from when they are open to receiving it. Learning to recognise the difference between the two is a crucial professional skill.

This brings me to the role of peer review, which can take many forms. A very simple technique that we might not immediately associate with peer review is to make the internal process external from time to time. In other words, if we get stuck, it can help greatly just to verbalise the challenges to a close colleague or friend. Clichés are clichés because they hold fundamental truths. Talk about your work to someone as if you are explaining it to a grandparent. Articulate why you are stuck – you might be surprised by how the problem reveals (and resolves) itself. This is a form of peer review. We can do this at all and any stages of the writing process. We tend to think about peer review as the final (damning?) judgment of journal peer reviewers (and the insidious impact of Reviewer No 2), but everything turns on how we *act* when faced with peer review. Here, I deliberately avoid the term 'react' which can be immediate and unreflective. Instead, I am talking about considered action in light of peer review, however painful it feels when first received.

Once again, I am drawn at this juncture to a lesson from my personal life. I have come to understand that when we receive negative input from someone about ourselves (or our work) it is one of two things: either it is true (in which case, deal with it), or it is nonsense (in which case, ignore it or laugh it off). As to negative peer review, either the reviewer has a valid point (and the work could be

5 Katherine Morgan Schafler, *The Perfectionist's Guide to Losing Control: A Path to Peace and Power* (Penguin Random House 2023).

improved) or it is misguided or a misunderstanding (in which case it can be rebutted or politely rejected on good cause shown).

In my capacity as an Editor-in-Chief of an international journal, I always remind authors that they are not obliged to take on board all peer review comments. Indeed, with two or more reviewers it is sometimes impossible to do so. Rather, the task is to treat the peer review as either destructive criticism (to be rebutted or rejected) or constructive feedback (to be welcomed and incorporated). A reasonable, well-justified response avoids the output getting stuck or being rejected outright. And, even if the final decision is not to publish, there is always a valuable lesson to take forward in further refining and honing the work and, ultimately, one's Research Voice. And let us not imagine that we are simply passive actors in these processes: we are entitled to receive productive and constructive feedback on our work, which should be taken in the spirit of adaptive excellence outlined above.

As already noted, the writing and publishing process can take a long time. But we ought to ask: what is our own relationship between our writing and time? More specifically, how do you respond to a deadline? For those who fear disapproval, a deadline can be a great motivator. Some of us work best under pressure, so the deadline provides the impetus to get the writing over the line. For those who fear chaos more than disapproval, however, the deadline makes little difference to the writing process. They would rather miss the deadline than give rein to a chaotic output in the public domain.

The common point about the role of time and stuckness is this: cultivate your own healthy relationship with the time you need to complete your writing. Use deadlines to your advantage, if they work for you. If they do not, examine what are the motivators and environmental conditions that drive you to research and write. Do not seek to carve out acres of time if the result is just that the research and writing process expands diffusely to fill the time. Experiment with different engagements with time: dedicate fixed pockets of time to complete small research and writing tasks. Explore whether you work better by 'eating the frog' first thing in the day or week or whether dedicated undisturbed days best promote your process. Whatever works for you – protect that time come what may. If all else is failing, go back to your Abstract to remind yourself of your purpose, to check you are still on track, to assess where you are in the writing process, and maybe to change tack a little if you have veered off course.

As the reader will have hopefully realised, much of my commentary in this piece is diagnostic in nature. I have offered ways to think about and approach the writing process with a view to better understanding *where* we are stuck and *why* we might be stuck. As a final point in answering the current question:

'How do I become *unstuck*?', I would like to offer one further layer of analysis. This is to invite the reader to consider the notion of stuckness at both the micro and the macro level of what we do when we write for an academic audience.

Examining stuckness at the micro level is about forensically exploring which sub-part of the entire writing process currently confronts us. Are we stuck on the big idea or with giving expression to the research problem, or articulation of the research questions etc? This level of close scrutiny works as an accurate diagnosis of the nature of the stuckness itself. We cannot hope to 'fix' a problem unless we understand it in its fundamentals. This micro analysis promotes this process of deep understanding.

At the opposite extreme, a macro analysis leads us to ask: how does this particular output refine and give better expression to my Research Voice? Literally, this is about asking 'What do I want to say?' but it does so in the context of a much wider sweep of outputs and publications – put simply, what is the cumulative effect of this academic's contributions to the field? How does this particular output add to that intellectual legacy? This is not to suggest that everything we write and publish must be part of a connected whole. Rather, it is to encourage self-reflection on where and how any given publication fits into the overall picture we are painting in our field. This is an important exercise for various reasons. If we are indeed seeking to build a body of work around certain ideas/themes/insights/data, then it can be very helpful in overcoming stuckness to ask: what does this current output need to do to contribute to the bigger picture? In contrast, if our current project is an outlier, not connected to any existing or emerging intellectual narrative, then what does it have to do to make its unique, discrete, one-off impact in the field? Do that and no more. Do not expect more of this piece of writing. Let it go once you have sufficient confidence that it has a reasonable prospect of doing its work.

These last points speak to the process of telling the story of our career. Instrumentally, this is vital for career progression and promotion. Intellectually, there is even more value to be had. Others in this special section offer thoughts on why we write. Self-evidently, we each have our own answer to this question. But collectively, as an academic community, I believe we write because we have something to say about making our understanding of the world and the human condition *better*. This always starts with an idea. If we are not excited about our source ideas, we are sowing the seeds of our own academic discontent. If we are not excited and invigorated by the kernel of our idea, this might actually be the source of our stuckness. In overcoming our stuckness, we need to reveal what is truly at stake within ourselves.

CONCLUSION

This piece attempts to analyse the myriad reasons why we might experience stuckness in academic writing. I offer a three-dimensional matrix of approaches to understanding the problem, being:

- identify internal v external factors driving stuckness;
- distinguish between being stuck about writing v being stuck with our writing;
- engage in micro v macro analysis of the processes of writing and publishing to overcome stuckness

But I misspeak in talking about 'the problem' as if stuckness were a unitary thing. As the discussion demonstrates, it is quite the opposite and it manifests in very particular ways to each individual. Accordingly, my ambitions for this piece must remain extremely modest. If my reflections provoke thought and reflection on the writing process, I will consider that my work here is done. If my musing promotes dialogue, I will have exceeded my own expectations. If my advice helps a single colleague to overcome stuckness, then my heart will sing.

As a final point, I feel I should reflect on my own experience of writing this contribution: did I experience stuckness? Initially, yes, when I received the invitation because I was not sure what to write. I needed time to come up with my idea. I was presented with an invitation to discuss 'Why do I write?' but I came to realise that actually what excited me more was the question: 'Why do I not write?' The reason why this question excites me is because it has haunted me throughout my career. My most painful and enduring experience of stuckness was with my PhD. It took me almost eight years to complete (back in the day when universities did not care about completion rates). It hung like a millstone around my neck while I started a new lectureship, developed teaching, published stand-alone articles, got involved in committee work, taught Business Law (!) and threw myself into far too many other projects. This was all displacement activity. Valuable for my CV, but a distraction from what I really wanted: the PhD.

In the end, I took drastic action and left one institution for another. I do not recommend this as a strategy! But what I learned was this: we choose our priorities by our actions. I eventually finished the PhD and to this day it remains the professional achievement of which I am most proud. My stuckness had been a fabrication of my own making. I vowed never again to put myself in that position regarding my research. This piece is a reflective account of some of the strategies that have worked for me over the years to honour the vow I made to myself.

What are you stuck on?