



How and why we write

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As I have participated in writing workshops organised by different institutions over the last few years, I have spent a lot of time thinking about the ‘how’ of writing, and of how to distil my experience into tips for postgraduates and early career scholars. Like everyone else (I imagine), I write on a computer, at home or in my office at the university. I struggle with distractions. I have good days and bad days (and sometimes even worse days). I repeatedly miss deadlines, and yet, in spite of everything, writing projects inch towards completion. So how can this intensely personal experience be translated into more general advice?

I welcome these attempts to demystify the writing process, to reflect on how we write and how we overcome the barriers that we all too frequently encounter. And it is also important to recognise that these are shared experiences. Everyone struggles, and it can be reassuring to hear from others about how they have dealt with problems. Yet it often seems that the advice becomes a series of anecdotes, as more senior or established academics recount episodes from their career or

tell how they write best in noisy cafes or secluded libraries, with or without background music, sitting down or standing up, in the early morning or late at night, on a particular type of computer or with a fountain pen and so on. These are engaging, but it is clear that what works for some people may not work for others. So the advice to the early career academic boils down to finding out what works for you, trying to develop good writing habits, and carving out time to write in the face of (or in spite of) institutional pressures. This is, I think, absolutely essential (and there is a great deal of really excellent advice in the other contributions to this series), but, as in so many other areas of life, this approach individualises and diverts attention away from structural issues: the message that we implicitly convey through these tips is that if you are struggling with writing it is *your* problem because of *your* bad habits, *your* propensity to be distracted. To be sure, we can offer the reassurance that you are not alone, that others have experienced similar difficulties and overcome them, but the message is ultimately that you must try harder (or differently)

to overcome the problems and become a productive member of the academic community.

But there is more to it than this, as our individual circumstances (*how* we write) are shaped by things which are beyond our control. Most immediately, there is our work situation, and whether or not it is precarious or properly resources time for research and writing. Also important are the circumstances of our home life and how these impact on time for writing because of relationships, caring responsibilities or even simply whether you have a room of your own to work in – something that was brought home with particular force during the pandemic. And another rarely acknowledged factor is the question of how to sustain good writing practices over the course of a (potentially) long academic career. While the focus of these writing workshops is often on early career researchers, it is equally important to reflect on how to sustain good writing practices in the face of institutional and domestic pressures over longer periods of time. We face different kinds of time pressures at different stages of our academic life and so what works at one stage will not necessarily work at others. And, of course, universities have also changed quite dramatically over the past (nearly) 40 years that I have been working in them such that I wonder whether I, as a (now increasingly) senior white male academic, holding a secure post

at a reasonably financially secure university (at least for now), am capable of speaking to the pressures that face early career academics sitting down to write their first article or book. So before reflecting on the question of *how* I write, I think it is important to think about *why* we write and how that shapes our experience of writing.

When I talk about the ‘why’ I mean more than just individual motivations. I take it as read that we are all, to a greater or lesser extent, motivated (even driven) by a personal interest in, or enthusiasm for, our area of research. This general motivation is maybe what brought us into academia in the first place, but it is distinct from the question of why we might be writing any particular piece of work. Here there might be much more specific reasons or demands that make it easier or harder to complete a piece of writing. It might be a matter of fulfilling a long overdue commitment to write something on a topic that is no longer a focus of current research interest. Or it is perhaps the slog of trying to complete a project that we have been living with for too long. Or writing a short piece in response to some more immediate provocation. Or the pressure of writing to a deadline (or even writing without a deadline). In each case we might feel more or less motivated to sit down and face the computer screen, and how we approach the writing is almost certainly shaped by how we experience and respond to that

pressure. However, these are not the only reasons why we write. We also write because we have to as part of our job, and I think that if we don't acknowledge this when we think about *how* we write we will fail to understand those institutional pressures and how they impact on the writing process.

Most, if not all, of my colleagues, I think, understand their role as academics as a kind of vocation. We research and write because we see it as a particular kind of commitment, even a way of life. I have often heard colleagues say that we are lucky to be paid for doing something that we enjoy – which is certainly true – and that our research is something we would perhaps do in our spare time even if we had to work in another job. Indeed, for legal academics this is sometimes presented as a trade-off: we might have earned more in private practice, but accept a lower-paid job in academia because of the greater freedom and because it allows us to write about what we are interested in. (I'm not sure that this would necessarily be the case for criminal lawyers, and certainly not for one like me who is interested in the history and theory of the law. The idea that I might ever have earned a higher salary in private practice is something of a fantasy). And perhaps more troublingly, by doing this we acquiesce in the systematic undervaluing of our work by universities (our employers) and

government. We do this when we work additional hours in the evenings or at weekends, or take time away from our family and friends to work. We value the work – and I am certainly not suggesting that this cannot be personally fulfilling – but its true cost (in purely financial terms) is not fully recognised.

Our research, then, is generally something we care about and have some sort of personal connection to. It is all-consuming, something more than a job, a kind of identity. And this self-understanding is also fostered by certain academic practices – particularly in the SHAPE disciplines where most legal scholarship sits.¹ In contrast to research in the STEM subjects,² PhD researchers are expected to come up with their own project and do not usually work as part of a team (or often even a research group). Most articles and books are still sole-authored. Although there are some interesting observations on co-authorship practices in this series, it is still not the norm, as it is in STEM subjects. We may collaborate on projects, but the writing part is still usually a matter for each individual researcher. And, crucially, the *form* that the writing takes is part of the research process. Writing is not just a means of presenting the results of research carried out elsewhere or at an earlier stage: how an argument is structured and the language that is used is fundamental to the working

1 Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy.

2 Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

out or development of ideas. The process of writing is part of the research. How we write matters, and good writing can make a difference to how our research is understood.

Given all this, it is not then surprising that a lot of the advice that we give to early career scholars is precisely about establishing and nurturing their connection to their research topic and developing a style that will make their work stand out. Choose a topic that means something to you, that you can live with for the period it takes to complete the PhD or research project; develop your academic identity in subject matter and approach; take your time and publish when you are happy with the results, and so on.³ And as our careers develop we take on roles, often unpaid or unrecognised by our institutions, acting as reviewers or journal editors (and we encourage early career scholars to do so) because of our interests and personal commitments to our discipline. These practices appeal (implicitly or explicitly) to an idealised version of an academic career where universities stand apart from business, where knowledge is pursued for its own sake, and where research is a highly individual process. It is also a system where there is, above all,

time – to study, to discuss ideas, to research and to write. Some of us (depending on our age) may have experienced a version of this (and it may even still exist at certain privileged institutions), where teaching loads are relatively low and the pressure to publish is minimal. But it is surely increasingly rare. When I began my academic career at the University of Strathclyde in the late 1980s there was less immediate pressure to publish, but even at that time the (Thatcher) Government was cutting university budgets and we were being asked to do more with less. From the vantage point of the present day it may look like a golden age, but it didn't feel that way at the time.

By contrast with this ideal, our actual institutional roles (what we are paid for) are increasingly pressurised.⁴ Time at work is parcelled up (administration time, teaching time, and research time) and monitored. Performance (including research performance) is continually reviewed. Targets are set and underperformance can lead to management intervention. Research is assessed according to short-term metrics such as impact or citation scores rather than its long-term impact on a field. There is pressure to publish quickly and often so that annual review targets can be met. Research outputs are

3 Although it may be precisely this sort of attachment that then leads to the kind of perfectionism that can be a barrier to completing a project.

4 See M Breeze et al, *Time and Space in the Neoliberal University: Futures and Fractures in Higher Education* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019). On the law school specifically, see M Thornton, *Privatizing the Public University: The Case of Law* (Glasshouse 2012).

valued less for their content or contribution to knowledge than for what they mean to the institution: in terms of status (Is it REF-able? Is it 3* or 4*?), their contribution to international rankings, to nebulous indices such as research intensity, or because of the income that they might bring (quality-related research funding). Some institutions play an increasingly interventionist role in reading the work of academics prior to publication to ensure that, in their view, it is suitable for submission to REF. Alternatively, they set targets in terms of the numbers of publications or the journals that papers should be submitted to. There is, in some areas, a movement away from the individual towards collective large grant applications and the encouragement of joint publications. Universities still play lip-service to the idea of research-led teaching, but early career researchers, in particular, are often required to teach on courses that do not relate to their research – and the gap between research and teaching can put a strain on the researcher's conception of self (as well as taking time away from research). And most importantly of all, this is now going on against the backdrop of financial crisis across the UK university sector: departments are being closed, jobs are being cut, student numbers are still increasing, and more and more colleagues are employed on insecure, temporary contracts. For many, this means increases in workload as staff numbers and

student services are cut. Publishing can seem as though it offers the difference between a precarious short-term contract and more secure employment (though even that cannot be guaranteed), but it is hard to write under this sort of pressure. Writing (and research), then, is not something that can be abstracted from the question of the institutions that we work for and our conditions of work because it is something that we do in this context.

In this world then we write not only because we want to, but because we have to write: to be promoted or to be included in the institutional REF submission, or even, increasingly, just to hold on to our jobs. Not to write would mean not being promoted and would change, and likely damage, our institutional position. We write because it is part of our job to write – but the institution increasingly expects to exercise some control over what we write and where we get it published. And writing under these conditions is a difficult – and stressful – experience. It can feel pointless – why should we do this if it will not be recognised or will not change my situation? – and this can corrode the larger motivations that brought us into academia in the first place. If we look at it in this context, to think about *why* we write looks somewhat different. Writing which is subject to these pressures is a very different experience from the understanding of writing in the idealised university. And these pressures do not only affect *why*

we write, as this increasingly has an impact on *what* we write, and also *how* we write.

The question is how to manage these pressures that we encounter in our institutional roles – to find time for research and writing – and how to reconcile that role with our understandings of ourselves as researchers. There is no easy answer to how we deal with this but I do think it is important that we confront it in a clear-eyed way. In what remains I will offer some reflections on how and why we might continue to write in these circumstances. In doing this I am drawing on the increasing, and important, work on slow scholarship, or the ‘slow’ university, which challenges us to reflect on our practices of research and writing in the neoliberal university.⁵

WRITING FAST AND WRITING SLOW

As a starting point it is worth remembering that we write all the time as part of this job. A huge percentage of our time is spent writing: lectures, emails, referee reports for journals or books, comments on draft chapters from PhD students, comments on student essays – as well as our own projects. Much of this writing is ‘fast’. What I mean by this is

that I don’t generally think twice when writing lectures or doing these sorts of comments or reports or emails. This is not to say that I don’t take care, but that these are not difficult to write and with practice it becomes second nature to structure comments and reports. Yet, when it comes to my ‘own’ writing – a paper or a book chapter – I routinely second-guess myself and the writing process slows down and becomes much more laboured. I can find it difficult to get started, spending inordinate amounts of time staring at the blank screen or writing and rewriting the same one or two sentences. And progress is incremental: I write a paragraph, then revisit and rewrite that same paragraph, tweaking the wording or adding a footnote, before adding a few additional sentences. And this process is repeated so that the document grows only slowly and painfully. Even writing this piece, where we were encouraged by the editors not to let it become a writing ‘task’, I slip into this habit of constant revision and worry. What is striking is that something that comes very easily (and quickly) in one context becomes so difficult in another.

It is not difficult to understand why this should be the case. The product of slower writing is very different. It has a more permanent quality, as something that will be

5 As examples see A Mountz et al, ‘For slow scholarship: a feminist politics of resistance through collective action in the neoliberal university’ (2015) 14 *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 1235–1259; M O’Neill, ‘The slow university: work, time and well-being’ (2014) 15(3) *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*.

published and so the audience is very different. And the rewards are different too – there is a sense of satisfaction or accomplishment that comes with the completion of a more substantial piece of work that is not the case with more mundane writing activities. It is natural to slow down and to want to take more care, but this can feel like a kind of writer’s block too, leading to the worry that progress is too slow or that what I have written is inadequate which can make progress feel even harder. So the paradox is that something that we look forward to – time to write on our own projects – can itself become a source of stress.

In dealing with this, I think it is important to remember that writing is a form of labour (as part of our job), not relaxation – even as we might look forward to it as a kind of escape from other aspects of our jobs. We recognise this idea of labour quite readily in the other contexts that we write in and (generally speaking) try to write as quickly and efficiently as possible, but allow ourselves to grow frustrated when writing slowly if the writing does not come so easily. This is not to say that we should always try and write fast – there are good reasons for slowing down and taking care. Good scholarship takes time. But it is to recognise that the labour of writing is a particular kind of effort. Indeed, as I have grown older and more experienced, I

can now acknowledge that for me ‘writing time’ more often than not is slow and painful (laboured, even), but that the frustration and the hours spent staring at a blank screen are an essential part of the process – even though it can feel as though time is being wasted. ‘Starting’ writing is a process that includes staring at a blank screen or deleting false starts, as well as the stages where writing seems to flow more easily. For me then, it is better to focus on the process – making time for writing and committing to that – rather than worrying about outcomes. But how do we make time for this as our jobs become more pressured?

MAKING TIME

It is often suggested in writing manuals that we should make time for writing so that it becomes a regular part of our lives – write every day, or schedule certain times each week and so on to practise the craft of writing on a regular basis. The idea is also to protect some writing time, perhaps in the early morning or at night, against institutional pressures. This is something that I have done (and continue to do) myself, getting up early to write while the house is quiet and not checking email or the internet until more normal business hours begin. Much of my book *Making the Modern Criminal Law*⁶ was written between the hours of 6am and 8am,

6 Lindsay Farmer, *Making the Modern Criminal Law: Criminalization and Civil Order* (Oxford University Press 2016).

as I wrote a few hundred words each morning before rushing to get children breakfasted and off to school on time and then going to teach. It was productive, but it was also a strain on myself and others as, in spite of what I was telling myself about still being available for family and work, this was not in fact the case as I became increasingly tired and distracted. So, following this sort of advice may be productive for a while but it is not necessarily cost-free. By doing something like this we might manage to hang on to some sense of our career as a vocation – what could feel more ‘vocational’ than the feeling of solitude as you work away in the early morning? But if we regard this work as personal, the research and writing takes up personal space and time. We might justify this to ourselves because it is ‘not *really*’ work but something that we enjoy doing, but in breaking down barriers between work and home or between work and leisure time this not only impacts on the personal, but can also create bad work practices. Most obviously, by doing writing on our own time we are doing unpaid work and crucially also letting the university off the hook for not making time for the research that they profess to value. We work harder, or for longer hours, by adding the writing time on top of our normal responsibilities – and so this in effect creates more work while stealing time from our other activities. And this can have a

psychic impact as well: the feeling of guilt if we fail to find time; or the feeling of guilt and stress that we are not spending time with our loved ones or colleagues. So the challenge is not only to make time, but to do so in a way which does not create more work for ourselves or others. I don’t have any easy answers here as how to manage this will depend on each person’s particular circumstances, but I do think that collectively we ought to reflect on the trade-offs that are involved here.

STYLE AND ‘VOICE’

It is almost certainly the case, as Mariana Valverde argued in the initial essay in this series, that the academy negatively affects writing practice.⁷ She points to the pressure to publish in top journals and requirements to publish often which encourage speed and discourage complexity, producing a certain kind of conformity in the way that papers are written. In the UK, I think that further pressure comes from the REF. The advice we are often now given is that we need to identify and spell out a paper’s significance and the contribution that it makes so that members of a REF panel can see this – leading to rather formulaic opening and concluding sections. It also comes from the pressure to publish quickly, perhaps before you are ready, because of the need to meet certain targets, meaning that we

7 M Valverde, ‘How the academy negatively affects writing practice’ (2025) 76(RS) Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly 1–8.

might pay less attention to style. All of these are further ways in which the *why* of writing impacts on the *how*. Notwithstanding these pressures, it is really important to pay attention to style because, as I suggested above, the writing is part of the research process. Writing is not, or should not be, simply a way of communicating data, and good writing style is not simply an optional extra. How a paper is written, how engaging and readable that argument is, and the language that is used, can have a massive impact on whether work is read or not – or indeed in establishing its originality, rigour and significance.

A good writing style, however, is not something that is innate, but must be worked on – perhaps also by trying out different styles to see where you feel at home or what is appropriate to the kind of subject matter you are writing about. But developing a good writing style – and, perhaps more than that, a distinctive academic voice – is something that takes time and practice. There are some simple tips, such as paying attention to the length of sentences or paragraphs or avoiding overly complex language – and just because an idea or an argument or an idea is complex does not mean that it cannot be expressed in clear language.⁸ What can often look effortless in writing is probably something that has been developed over many years

of hard work. For me what is also central to the question of style is reading (and not only law books or academic writing). It is important to read not only for the substantive content and because we think something might be useful for our own work, but also to try and understand how they have been constructed, how their argument works and how language is being used well or badly. It is also, I think, important to share your work with others whose judgement you trust and to get feedback on your style and whether it works or not.

The question of ‘voice’ is perhaps harder to define, as it is linked to developing an academic identity, not only as a person who writes on certain subject matter, but who writes about it in a particular way. ‘Voice’ in this sense is something that is developed and sustained over a longer period of time. In thinking about this I remember advice that I was given when I was writing my PhD, which was to identify writers or books that I liked or admired and to think about whether or how I might use them as a model for my own work. This is not to suggest copying or mimicry, which would not work, but something broader. On the one hand, it is a matter of identifying how those works ‘work’ – the kind of books that they are and how that distinctive authorial voice is developed and sustained in relation to the subject matter. On the other hand, it is about reflecting

8 I frequently refer to George Orwell’s six rules for writing which, though a critique of certain kinds of political speech, have more general application. See G Orwell, ‘Politics and the English language’ (1946) *Horizon*.

on how those kinds of features might work (or not) for your own writing project and how you as an academic want to be seen and read. This, I think, is something that is neglected in a lot of writing advice and manuals which tend to focus on more tangible things such as routines and outputs, but I think that developing this sense of who we are as academics is increasingly important in the pressurised world of the contemporary university.

PLAN BUT BE OPEN TO CHANGE

The last point that I would make is a slightly contradictory one. On the one hand, I think it is absolutely essential to be organised and plan your writing. I am a somewhat obsessive planner. When I write something I plan out the steps of the overall argument, then each section, and then even at the level of each paragraph to ensure that I make sure that each point I want to make is being covered, and is being covered in what seems to me to be the proper order. At the same time, I think it is really important to be open to the fact that what might seem like a clear and logical plan at the start of the writing process might not work when you try to write it out – and so rather than sticking with the original plan it is necessary to adapt or even acknowledge that the original plan might be a mistake

and should be discarded. And so, as I go on, I replan, continually adjusting my initial structure if I feel that something is not working. This might be at the level of the paragraph or section, or even a matter of rethinking the larger argument of the paper. This is also an example of what I mean by saying that the writing is part of the research process as it is in the process of planning and writing that we think through ideas or arguments and really work them out – and the time spent doing this, even if it means deleting work and starting again, is always worthwhile. In thinking about this I often return to Michel Foucault's Preface to *The History of Sexuality* volume II where he explains the lengthy gap between the publication of volume I and volume II and why the focus of volumes II and III was different from the original plan for the series.⁹ This happened, he explains, because as he worked on the books he began to realise that, while the books might have been completed according to this original plan, he became aware that in order to write about the history of sexuality as he wanted he would need to pursue a different kind of enquiry – requiring that he discard the original plan and study new material.

But I reflected that, after all, it was best to sacrifice a definite programme to a promising line of research. I also reminded myself that it would probably

9 'Preface to *The History of Sexuality, Volume II*' reprinted in P Rabinow (ed), *The Foucault Reader* (Penguin 1984).

not be worth the trouble of making books if they failed to teach the author something he hadn't known before, if they didn't lead to unforeseen places, and if they didn't disperse one toward a strange and new relation with himself. The pain and the pleasure of the book is to be an experience.¹⁰

While for most (all?) of us the question of what we discard will

not be so dramatic – nor the outcome so celebrated – this nonetheless captures something essential about the experience of research which is the openness to change. Even, or especially, now, as universities seek to quantify and monitor research, it is crucial to hold on to what is important about the experience of researching.

10 Ibid 339.