



Write with fire, edit with ice (and come up for air)

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I've never kept a diary. The idea of committing my own musings to paper felt self-indulgent, gauche, and exposing even when it was for no one else's eyes. So, writing this now, for actual (theoretical) readers pitches me deep into the discomfort zone. But the invitation to contribute towards this imaginative series, which calls upon authors to provide their reflections on writing, was too intriguing to pass up – not least as I am often aware that I write a bit differently to some. For me, writing is a form of advocacy; a campaign on behalf of the very concept of evidence.

Drawn in, I read the other reflections in this series. And was immediately re-filled with self-doubt. What could I possibly add to the array of contributions from far more eminent (and, judging by their routines, infinitely more disciplined!) writers already in this rich selection? What could my piece hope to do? Inspire? Hardly – anyone reading is already interested in writing. Hold myself

out as a role model? Ridiculous. I have fifteen bad work habits for any useful one. Reminisce? Grotesque naval-gazing. In the end I decided to take the lead of ever-soothing 1970s painter–presenter Bob Ross: to 'just put your brush on the canvas and see where it wants to go'. What emerged is somewhere between personal reflection, confessional, advice, lamentation, and, hopefully, an encouragement to liberate ourselves from unhelpful expectations, academic fictions, and discriminatory intellectual policing. The (Mitigated) Joy of Writing, if you will.

After reflecting on why a personal writing voice is so important to my academic identity, this piece then explores the elements (pun *always* intended) of that voice. The final section notes that in order for any of this to happen, we need a chance to 'come up for air'. Getting that chance requires support and conducive circumstances – it is not something we can (or should) force through the sheer power of will.

1 Yes, I probably have seen the *Frozen* films too many times (hence the discussion of 'family time' below ...). Also, many thanks to Alice Welsh for helpful and kind comments and suggestions.

SCRIBO, ERGO SUM ...²

Writing is central to identity. It is voice. It should be distinctive to the author(s). I think this is partly why I have such a visceral reaction to generative artificial intelligence – leaving aside multiple atrocious environmental, ethical and health implications,³ it's this substitution of voice that appals me. Even when people suggest using it to produce short summary texts, I think – why? Why would I want to subcontract my thinking and speaking? It can't possibly better express what I want to express – at best, it can only do it differently. Even if it did produce objectively better prose (however such a thing is measured), it wouldn't be mine! I wholeheartedly agree with Lindsay Farmer's point in this series that style is 'not simply an optional extra',⁴ but is integral to the whole enterprise. In 2006 I inadvertently did the same thing Lindsay did – finding examples of good writing style, and thinking about why they worked – when I stumbled across a piece by political scientist Richard Bellamy.⁵ His arguments were made compelling

through beautifully crafted and easy to read prose. And I thought: I want to have *that* effect. I held and still hold no illusions of aspiring to Richard's standards, but the important lesson was that it was possible, even desirable, for academic writing to be *creative writing*.

Sometimes, often, writing is pain.⁶ It is wringing thoughts out of a tired brain that would rather stretch out in the sun of simple tasks. It is vulnerability – exposing those hard-won words to potential hostility and ridicule, always fearing that at some point someone is going to find me out – that it's all a masquerade and I'm an ignorant interloper. And it is pressure – the force of the blank page/screen; the weight of identity as an academic; and the mass of institutional and sectoral expectations and strains, all combining to create an atmosphere that for most, isn't exactly conducive to creative thought.

And yet ... writing is a form of magic.

When it works, ideas and thoughts that dance and skitter around the brain become

2 'I write, therefore I am.' A play on '*cogito, ergo sum*', or 'I think, therefore I am' from René Descartes's *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (Oxford University Press 2008 [1637]).

3 A rich assemblage of evidence is here: Ned Potter, 'What do we *know* about GenAI' (*Ned Potter* 12 February 2026).

4 Lindsay Farmer, 'How and why we write' (2026) 77 (RS) Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly 18–28, 26.

5 Richard P Bellamy, 'Still in deficit: rights, regulation, and democracy in the European Union' (2006) 12(6) *European Law Journal* 725–742.

6 As Alison Liebling describes in her beautiful, lyrical contribution to this series: 'Treating love, joy, anxiety, anger and pain as scholarly allies' (2025) 76 (RS) Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly 138–146, 138.

transmogrified into something coherent – it sometimes feels that it is only by writing I ever get to know or understand a subject, and what I think about it. And it is only by writing that I realise I have something valid to contribute, and that I understand why it is important (in the very small scale of things) that I do so.

As a way of discovering and then expressing your voice, writing is an extraordinary confidence builder for those otherwise terrified of taking up any kind of public space. Because writing is also performance. Finding ways to persuade an audience; to make your audience feel something, even if that feeling might simply be understanding. And that is why research and teaching go hand-in-hand. Any form of communicating research is also, at its heart, teaching; if you can persuade your reader that they have grasped something, that is gold, whoever your reader is.

If it is voice, writing must also be power; books are, a certain literary giant reminds us, ‘the best weapons in the world’.⁷ Which is part of the reason so many men jump to deride women’s writing. This is much more explicitly the case when writing for public engagement, at which point we are roundly reminded that being a Woman on the Internet is offensive in itself. *Don’t read below-the-line comments* we are warned – but if you expect more respectful

treatment on say, *The Conversation* (an outlet for bringing academic research to a wider audience), you may be disappointed. I remember one reader (a man) comparing me to a jealous ‘one-eyed witch’ for writing about sex discrimination. The comments on social media are more abusive still.

The call for women to ‘know their limits’⁸ may be more subtle in academic publishing, but it is still very much there, especially if a woman is through that medium challenging some aspect of the *status quo* and, thereby, of existing power relations. It is one thing asking people to think differently – it is another asking privileged men to embrace discomfort. But we should use that power; we should keep challenging, and that is where writing with fire comes in.

WRITE WITH FIRE

Write about something you care about. We all have writing tasks we take on simply because we’ve agreed to them – maybe as a favour; maybe because we want to feel included in a prestigious edited collection; maybe because it sounded vaguely interesting and the deadline felt like a lifetime away; maybe because we’ve not written for a while and thought an external impetus in the form of an obligation would help. But of course, we also know, deep inside, that those deadlines suddenly scream obscenely into view, that

7 Dr Who, of course.

8 Borrowed from *Harry Enfield and Chums*.

any ‘in-crowd’ *caché* of being included fades quickly, and that the ‘stick’ of external obligation is nowhere near as motivating as the ‘carrot’ of personal interest.

So, with some hindsight, if not much wisdom, I try not to take on too many of these, or they will crowd out my chances to work on things I *want* to write. They will steal the oxygen I need to write with fire. What does this mean? Well, writing because you care. Because something is important; because it is beyond interesting – the subject sucks you in and engrosses you. Because, for whatever reason, it matters. Often, because something is wrong. For me, it usually is that ‘something’ is wrong, rather than ‘someone’ – I don’t have to agree with everyone researching in my discipline, but picking intra-academic fights rarely seems constructive, and I try to fit my work as much as possible alongside, and build upon, the existing canons respectfully and helpfully. Of course, I may get a little more blistering when it comes to courts and judgments, but that, rightly or wrongly (spoiler alert: rightly), I see as part of the job.

My best writing happens, I think, when I am passionate about a subject. On this, I’m inspired by a host of powerful writers – Erica Szyszczak; Iyiola Solanke; Hilary Sommerlad; Sandra Fredman; Foluke Ifejola Adebisi; and Diamond Ashiagbor are just a few. Their work always

makes me *read with fire*. When I’m writing, I might be driven by intellectual passion – I have a low tolerance for poor logic on the part of law-makers – or by something more emotive. When the brilliant Tamara Hervey recently asked about my research positionality in a seminar about ‘Controversies in EU legal methods’,⁹ I said, a bit simply, ‘I really don’t like social injustice.’ Even this rather unobjectionable position is a little too honest for some, who prefer to maintain the fabrication of ‘objectivity’, or who conflate the important value of *impartiality* with the unconvincing illusion of *neutrality*. I faced warnings early in my career to not be ideological or emotional. But I have committed to a career passionately defending social justice. That is what it means to me, to write with fire.

Further advice I haven’t taken is to keep titles boring – apparently they should be an assemblage of words that people interested in the area are likely to use as search terms, to make sure your piece is as findable as possible. It’s probably good advice. But I want a title to capture the fizz of a piece. The title of my article critiquing the UK Government’s two-child limit for key subsistence benefits, was ‘*Done because we are too menny*’, channelling the fury of Thomas Hardy in *Jude the Obscure*. A title that makes an effort to be interesting can, for me, make the difference between ‘I should read

9 At the Laboratoire de Théorie du Droit, Aix-Marseille Université, March 2026, organised by Vincent Reveillere.

this' and 'I want to read this'. First impressions, and all that.

Of course, if you want to brandish a flame effectively, you have to write with care, and with precision. Too sweeping, or too careless and you get burned. It's less catchy but more accurate to say I try to write with 'forensic fire'. Focus in tightly on the subject of critique. Take time to pick things apart, to comb through the data, to work out the exact parameters of claims, conclusions, and criticism. I do this as I go along, but it is still important to catch fuzzy edges left over in the rather chillier editing zone.

EDIT WITH ICE

Read through the cold hard eyes of 'Reviewer 2'.¹⁰ And also read through the well-meaning, but unbearably busy eyes of a skim-reader. If a section does not obviously make sense in there, if it interrupts the flow, or the logic of the argument, or the elegance of the structure, then chances are it does not need reworking – it needs cutting. This is not simply about improving the quality of a piece, but also about wellbeing – there isn't time for agonising over how to reword sections that just do not belong there.

Of course, we can feel clingy about excerpts that represent chunks of work, or clever ideas, which *we know* are relevant, albeit in perhaps subtle or roundabout ways. And so the 'cut and paste' function, dropping something into a separate document, with the story we tell ourselves, that we can revisit it or incorporate it into a different piece, delivers us from the drama of the 'delete' key. Alternatively, it is a revelation how much you can collapse into footnotes.¹¹ Once we have done this, it is important to go round cauterising any open wounds – broken thoughts and half-ideas left leaking onto the page.

Editing is a chance to excise any overblown rhetoric and redundant verbiage. It sharpens our arguments and helps a coherent, compelling structure to emerge. It is probably also the stage where some of the biggest influencers on my writing loom large. When I was fourteen I apparently mistook 'circuitous sentences with big words' for good writing. My history teacher kept underlining them and suggesting I stop sounding like Sir Humphrey from *Yes, Minister*.¹² The reference was a bit before my time, but I got the gist. Fast forward a good many years to starting my PhD, when I thought academic writing involved

10 But like Shaun Pattinson advises, don't be Reviewer 2 for anyone else: S Pattinson, 'Writing for publication: inspiration and perspiration' (2025) 76 (RS) Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly 9–19, 19.

11 But with some moderation, please. (I'm looking at you, US law journals.)

12 Hat tip to Mrs Athis-Palmer! Don't be fooled by the double-barrelling. This was at a northern, comprehensive school, in a less-than-affluent area.

expressing ideas and theories by creating complex compound words with lots of hyphens. Enter stage left, long-suffering and exceptional PhD supervisor Michael Dougan, who suggested I ease off on the ‘Stalin-speak’. And there we have an editing mantra for the ages: ‘Don’t sound like Sir Humphrey. Or Stalin’.

In different ways, both the writing and editing stages are about *purpose*. Writing – when there is drive, a sense of purpose, and you need to express something. Editing – when cool, clear-headed, and instrumental – you ask, *does this serve its purpose?* Does it do what I want to, in the best way? But purpose alone is not enough. At times we are pretty much underwater with other work (and everything else). We need a chance to come up for air.

COME UP FOR AIR

There is a lot that gets in the way of writing that I do not think we can or should fight. This could be exhaustion; brain fog; illness (of self or others); the thousand and one mental succubae and deflations that are just part of academic life; and the cacophony of the rest of our jobs and lives reaching a crescendo at various points. I love Conor Gearty’s wonderful contribution to this series, but as to his eighth tip, that if we wait until we have time, we will never write,¹³ I can agree

only up to a point. Sometimes we really don’t have time – and that is ok. And sometimes we don’t have the drive, and that is ok too.

And, at risk of breaching some of the shibboleths in other contributions to this series, sometimes ‘routines’ are impossible. I usually find that if I have momentum on a project, I can work in the interstices of time, between school drop-offs and admin tasks, and emails, and student queries, and marking, and meetings-upon-meetings, and doctor appointments, and household chores, and pick-up times, etc, etc. While these current constraints are fairly recent, this approach of making use of pockets of time is not. I’ve always found myself dotting between jobs and volunteering, and caring, and travelling between family and university, alongside my studies. During my postgraduate years a good friend compared me to a tortoise – always with the bare essentials (overnight stuff and a laptop) in a bag on my back. I got used to reading and tapping away at my PhD work on train journeys, in hospital waiting rooms, in hotel rooms, cafes and whatever spare desk there was in whatever house or flat I happened to be staying or living in. I did not really have the luxury of deciding where I worked ‘best’; I just did it where and when I could – *if* I could. These days I don’t usually try to write during evenings and weekends – a confession that

13 Conor Gearty, ‘Eight tips for surviving (and enjoying!) academic writing’ (2025) 76 (RS) Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly 124–129.

sometimes seems to provoke academic gasps. But that is for family time – a lovely euphemism that sounds more wholesome than driving to sports/hobby lessons, treating headlice infestations,¹⁴ constantly replacing outgrown or lost school clothes, choreographing play dates, filling in reading records, plus yelling ‘Shoes! Teeth!’ repeatedly and at regular intervals.

However, in order to make use of the crevices of time available in the normal working week, I still need to have had some time and mental space at some point to get the project started and on a roll. I need time to *come up for air*. Especially given the disproportionate amount of ‘academic housekeeping’ women perform¹⁵ (an issue that is racialised as well as gendered),¹⁶ even as they become more senior,¹⁷ while many are also carrying a significant ‘motherhood penalty’¹⁸ and a towering sleep-debt. At some point, I have to slightly aggressively block out some space in my work diary. It requires what feels like rude discipline, to reply

‘no’ to the multiple various ‘can you just ...’ when people try to make appointments/set meetings/schedule events/set deadlines that clash with a blocked-out day. But if it is not ring-fenced, it won’t happen. And this is not just about producing written words. It includes time to think, and to meander. If I am not clear about what I want to write, there is no point in bashing out words for the sake of it. Instead, I am much better off reading, exploring, setting myself questions and analysing data. That way, like it or not, I’ll find the kindling. At some point, something will ignite.

I also wonder if another potential psychological barrier to writing, which can discourage us even when we get the chance to breathe, is the cognitive dissonance we all carry and to some degree suppress or ignore. A lot of academic publishing is built on a system that does not make sense, yet we are dependent upon and submissive to it. We produce literature which we also review (a task for which we have

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- 14 Honestly, far too much of my life is spent on this. And yet I don’t remember including ‘blitz nits’ in any of my long-term research plans.
- 15 So many studies to choose from, including: Sharon Bird, Jacquelyn Litt and Yong Wang, ‘Creating status of women reports: institutional housekeeping as “women’s work”’ (2004) 16(1) *National Women’s Studies Association Journal*, 194–206; Tamar Melanie Heijstra, Finnborg Salome Steinthorsdóttir and Thorgerdur Einarsdóttir, ‘Academic career making and the double-edged role of academic housework’ (2017) 29(6) *Gender and Education* 764–780.
- 16 Yao Wang et al, ‘Avoiding the housekeeping trap: challenges and opportunities in a decolonizing project at the university of East Anglia, UK’ in Ann E Lopez and Herveen Singh (eds), *Decolonizing Educational Knowledge* (Palgrave Macmillan 2024).
- 17 Bruce Macfarlane and Damon Burg, ‘Women professors and the academic housework trap’ (2019) 41(3) *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 262–274.
- 18 Ricardo Di Leo and Mariaelisa Epifanio, ‘The motherhood penalties: insights from women in UK academia’ (2026) *Community, Work and Family* 1–23.

neither time nor compensation), for journals that make money for conglomerates, charging lots for access, and to which increasingly our own institutions don't have direct access. And yet our careers and profiles seem contingent upon how well we keep feeding the system. It seems we are now all a little trapped, in a machine which seeks to keep the fruits of our labours locked in a closed system of knowledge production, at precisely the point when a whole new system of knowledge simulation threatens to usurp us.

I don't have solutions to this, beyond welcoming opportunities to publish things open access (thank you, *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly!*), and using the pressure valve of 'non-academic' outlets – whether they are blogs, or news articles, substacks, memos or briefings for specific audiences. There is a joy in democratising research findings. Of course, those fora can then make us more open to attempts at public humiliation and insults; but that is a reason for institutions to offer better

protection and support, not for women to stifle their voices.¹⁹

FINALLY...

So – where did the paintbrush take us? To a call to women, and others who are marginalised by oppressive power relations, to unapologetically take up space in the discourse; to reject myths and norms deployed in the interests of maintaining existing power dynamics; to rip away the fig leaves of neutrality and objectivity; to keep pushing back against, and keep drawing attention to, structural disadvantages in academia; to cut ourselves some slack; and to, in effect, Marie Kondo our writing loads – except rather than asking 'does it spark joy' when deciding what to focus on, and what to jettison, ask 'does it spark fire?'. And one final fire-writing hack: don't fizzle out at the end of a piece. Always end with a mic drop. Like after-images that linger on the retina when you close your eyes, that's what your reader takes away. *Last* impressions count too!

19 Something Michael Dougan and I reflected on in Michael Dougan and Charlotte O'Brien, 'Reflections on law and impact in the light of Brexit' (2019) 53(2) *The Law Teacher* 197–211.