SCIENTIFIC WRITING IN LINGUISTICS: EFFECTIVE WRITING HABITS

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NOTE: Much of the content in this class is adapted from:
THE NEUROBIOLOGY OF WRITING

HOW IT'S SUPPOSED TO WORK:
- PROCESS LANGUAGE
  - Temporal Lobes
- CONTROL HANDS
  - Motor cortex
- TRANSMIT COMMAND
  - Brain stem
- ACTIVATE MUSCLES
  - Motor neuron

HOW IT USUALLY WORKS:
- EXECUTE COMMAND
  - Prefrontal cortex
- SUCCESS!
  - Words
- TYPE
  - Flexor digitorum

INSECURITY
- Limbic System
FEAR
- Amygdala
PANIC
- Sympathetic System
CONFUSION
- Prefrontal cortex
NO MOTIVATION
- Anterior cingulate cortex
HESITATION
- Inferior frontal gyrus
BARRIERS TO WRITING

• Not enough time – “I’m too busy”
• Not inspired – “I’m not in the mood to write”
• Not focused enough – “I don’t know how / what to write”
• Not ready – “I haven’t read enough literature yet”
• Not enough confidence – “I’m not smart enough”
• Not good enough – “I’m too embarrassed to ask for help”
• Not perfect enough – “I can’t do it right on the first draft”

BUT …

• Being an excellent writer does NOT require that you have enough time, inspiration, confidence or knowledge!
• The first draft is not good for any writer at this level!
• Asking for help (i.e. tips, feedback) is normal and expected!
OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO WRITING

Successful writers:

• Schedule regular times for writing, and keep to them
• Keep writing regularly even though they do not feel inspired, ready, or confident
• Plan first so they have a map of what to write
• Ask for help regularly – get tips on writing, get feedback on drafts
• See the first draft as getting basic ideas and logic on paper, and expect readable drafts to come through editing
• Practice – expertise typically requires 10,000 hours
• Deliberate practice – focus deliberately on specific writing goals
ADAPT YOUR ATTITUDE

You are a professional writer!

Writing is not:

• Something extra you do when you happen to have time
• A personal hobby that you do only when you’ve already fulfilled your obligations to everyone else

Writing is:

• A main part of your job – academics (grad students, post-docs, professors, etc) write for a living
• Your most important tool for professional advancement and success – grades, promotions, future jobs, funding, and salary levels all depend on how well and how much you write
• Ethically required as a product of grant funding, scholarship, investment of advisor time, etc.

Goodson 2013: 22-23
A HEALTHY ATTITUDE

Attitude = Value + Belief → Change in Behavior

**Value**
I highly value writing well and producing more steadily without stress

**Belief**
I believe that developing a healthy writing habit will lead to better-quality writing and more steady and stress-free productivity

**Change in Behavior**
I regularly and consistently practice strategies that lead to healthy writing habits

Goodson 2013: 23-24
ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS

What does it take to get me to write (begin and continue)?
What keeps me away from writing? What are my barriers?
What aspects of writing do I really enjoy?
What aspects of writing do I especially dislike?
How much time / resources do I give to improving my writing?

Then:
• Develop one strategy to reduce a key barrier / dislike
• Develop one strategy to enhance a key positive aspect
• Commit to one strategy for further improving your writing
• Monitor strategies weekly or monthly
• Adapt as necessary

Goodson 2013: 28
WRITING SCHEDULE

Block out a time each day
  • Morning, evening, after exercise, …
  • 15 minutes, half hour, hour, …

Target a number of words / pages each day
  • 500 words, 1000 words, 1 page, 2 pages, …

Stick to it regardless of other commitments
  • Writing is low time pressure but high importance
  • Put “writing session” in your calendar as an appointment

Eliminate distractions so you don’t lose focus
  • Set a timer for up to 45 minutes, then take a break
  • No e-mail, phone, internet, chatting
    • https://freedom.to

Goodson 2013: 27-29
SEPARATE GENERATING FROM EDITING

Generating
• Finding and recording words, thoughts, and ideas
• Requires creativity

Editing
• Analyzing and changing existing text to improve it
• Requires attention to detail, analysis, repetition

Don’t try to write it right the first time!
• Too hard to multitask – too hard to be creative and analytic at the same time

Goodson 2013: 32-33
GENERATE FIRST, EDIT LATER

Write first draft fast without stopping to edit
• Do not pay attention to spelling, punctuation, grammar, vocabulary, logic, etc.
• Do not backtrack to change anything
• Maybe set a time limit or length limit

Then edit the ideas and logic
• Look for good ideas to keep and develop
• Place all similar ideas together – like with like
• Organize the text – move sentences to make sense
• Generate more sentences to develop what you have

Then edit the spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, etc.
• Focus on these smaller details after the big details are in place

Goodson 2013: 32-33
Version 1
Begin with: why should we care if there is a relationship between exercise and writing? We care because, if we find a relationship, we can make a case for keeping/increase physical activity in schools, and we can propose mechanisms that facilitate writing (productivity & quality) among academics.

Version 2
   Central Question: Why should we care if there is a relationship between exercise and writing?
   Argument / Answer: We should care because: 1) findings will help build the case for keeping physical education in the schools’ curricula; 2) findings may help develop tailored strategies for improving academic writing; and 3) because solutions to improve academic writing are needed.

Goodson 2013: 35-37
Version X

Rationale: Why should researchers care to explore the relationship between physical exercise and academic writing? First, because this relationship has yet to be systematically examined, even though related studies have shown physical activity (especially aerobic exercise) can enhance school children’s and adolescents’ overall academic performance / achievement and improve cognitive functions in various age groups. Second, because if writing is the most important skill for success in academia, identifying strategies to promote healthy writing habits and improve writing productivity / quality should be a concern for university administrators, faculty, and graduate students.

Goodson 2013: 35-37
DELIBERATE PRACTICE

Three parts
• Targeted, focused repetition of specific behaviors
• Persistent correcting of mistakes
• Goal of improving performance

Slow down and attend to difficulties in your writing
• Making the story line clear?
• Writing concisely or precisely?
• Finding the right vocabulary?
• Specifying transitions and connections?

A consistent approach
• Make a list of things to attend to in your own writing
• Stick it near your computer as a reminder
• Regularly (weekly, monthly) take stock of your progress

Goodson 2013: 25-26
KEEP A WRITING LOG

Record how long and what you write in each writing session

Advantages (Goodson 2013, p. 31)
- Keeps me on track
- Provides positive reinforcement
- Keeps me accountable to others (colleagues, students)

Advantages in study of faculty writing (Boice 1989)
- Group 1 wrote daily
- Group 2 wrote daily AND kept records
- Group 3 wrote daily, kept records, AND shared them
- Group 2 outperformed Group 1 by factor of 4!
- Group 3 outperformed Group 2 by factor of 9!

Goodson 2013: 38-40
# SAMPLE WRITING LOG

<table>
<thead>
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<th>DATE</th>
<th>TASK</th>
<th>START</th>
<th>STOP</th>
<th>MIN.</th>
<th>ACCOMPLISHED</th>
<th>TOT</th>
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<td>chapter X</td>
<td>9:15</td>
<td>9:45</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 17, 2019</td>
<td>review Y</td>
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<td>12:15</td>
<td>45</td>
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<td>13:40</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>review Y</td>
<td>10:15</td>
<td>11:00</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>reviewed Method</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 21, 2019</td>
<td>article Z</td>
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<td>9:45</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>review Y</td>
<td>10:00</td>
<td>10:45</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>reviewed Results</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 22, 2019</td>
<td>article Z</td>
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<td>16:30</td>
<td>60</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>350</td>
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</table>
WRITING PROJECT DIARY

Keep list of writing projects
  • Include outline
  • Include plan to achieve each section / step by due date

Keep notes about what you want to do next
  • As you finish writing each day
  • As you finish each part of the project
  • Sticky note beside computer
  • Note in writing journal or log
HOW TO KEEP GOING

Plan first to get focus and stay on track
  • Brainstorming, concept map, issue tree, outline

Use oral presentations to motivate writing
  • Presentation to advisor/group, conference presentation
  • Converting one slide to text takes about 20 minutes

Start with easy parts to build momentum
  • First methods, then results, then discussion
  • Introduction last

First draft ➔ just do it!
  • Goal to get text on the screen, stream of consciousness
  • Write even if it seems bad (usually looks better the next day)

Save editing and revising for the second draft
  • Show colleagues and advisors second or third draft
  • 10-20 revisions in total is normal

Reward yourself for progress ☺
WHEN TO STOP

Iterative process
• Draft, revise, comments, revise, comments …

Get feedback
• From colleagues – peer critique
• From advisor
• Sooner rather than later

It will never be perfect – let go when it is “good enough”

“It is a scientific insight to perceive when a project is finished.”
– Wolfgang Ketterle (Nobel Prize in Physics 2001)
TO IMPROVE WRITING SKILLS

Practice, practice, practice
Read articles and study their style
Start / join a journal club – include discussion of writing
Get feedback on your writing – follow it
Give feedback on others’ writing
Start / join a writing group
Read books about scientific writing
Take a course
Make checklist of desiderata / problems – use it
REFERENCES


