



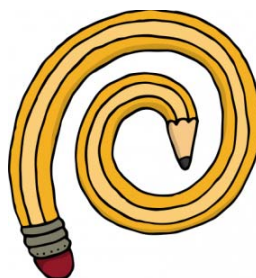
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11 Tricks and tips to get those words on a page

APRIL 26, 2016 BY NOELLE STERNE, PH.D. 0 COMMENTS

Whether we're in the throes of a dissertation, article, or book, most of us have trouble writing—starting, continuing, finishing. Especially after our original flush of enthusiasm and amazed production at the first few paragraphs or pages, we find that each of our writing projects carries its own problems.

From my own experiences with tortured writing and those of my academic coaching and editing clients, here I'll share eleven tricks and tips to help you ease into or continue your writing. If you need convincing, included too are credible rationales for how each method can help you.



1) Feel Good.

First, you've got to feel physically and emotionally well. If you're overly tired, hungry, angry, or worried about something other than your current writing project, when you start to work you will defeat yourself. Dissertation coach Rachna Jain (2014) suggested that you "do what it takes to feel better, first—and then start working. It's better to have two hours of focused work rather than four hours of so-so work" (para. 1).

How this method helps: You feel good (!) You have the energy, focus, and interest to concentrate on the work at hand and may almost enjoy it. As you progress, you dare to feel a small sense of accomplishment, even at a paragraph or a page.

2) Make Separate Files

For each part of the work—prefatory pages, introduction, chapters, reference list, appendices—make separate files, hard copy or computer. Refer to your university handbook, journal specs, or publisher's requirements for margins, headers, pagination, font style and size, spacing, headings, and hierarchy of subheadings. If a template is supplied, use it. Create your files in the correct format. Later, you will combine all files for the finished work.

How this method helps: When you separate the work into manageable chunks, you feel you have a handle. Acting on this task, you feel like you're really writing something, even if it's only the title of a chapter or section. Thrilled in spite of yourself, you see the parts of the work take shape. And more—When you're in a particular chapter or section, and a fabulous idea occurs to you for another, as it often does once you immerse, you quickly click to that place and type a note for later development.

3) Create a Schedule for Doing This Work

Decide on the days/hours to work on this project and write them in your calendar or schedule book. Be realistic—if you're a morning person and your head is clearest at 7:15 a.m. (shudder), that's the time to make a note of your promise and plunge in. If you know you fade at 8:00 p.m. and are only good for watching *Shark Tank*, schedule other times for the writing.

How this method helps: You are honoring your body clock and preferred working times. No use trying to force the work at what is some ungodly hour for you (see Number 1). Whatever others do or don't or may dictate as "normal" doesn't have to affect you. You don't have to answer to them. A colleague admitted she sleeps until 10:00 a.m. and then, with several judicious breaks, keeps going until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. Whatever

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4) Start With What's Obvious or Easy

To begin writing in earnest, choose the easiest subtopic or section (no one has to know). This section may not be the introduction, which is an overview of the whole and often requires immersion in the work before you know what you're doing. Instead, you might choose a section more straightforward, like recruitment of participants or your data analysis methods. Despite the King's advice to the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*, you don't have to start at the beginning and keep going until you reach the end. Linear can be overrated.

How this method helps: You actually begin writing the meat. Warming up, you'll produce more, arrive at new insights, and gain more confidence and comfort in the writing. After a while, to your shock, you may see two solid subsections emerging full-blown or feel your fingers irresistibly typing out the introduction at full speed.

5) Set a Timer

For each writing session, set a timer for 30 or 45 minutes, or 10 or 15. Promise yourself a delicious reward when the timer bongs (chocolate chip muffin, Judge Judy marathon, walk by the lake, 1997 Super Bowl replay).

How this method helps: You're doing something, anything. Short-term rewards work.

6) Use the Diaper Method

I developed the Diaper Method (soon to be patented) when an author friend with two very small children complained that all she was doing was diapering instead of writing (for a fuller account, see Sterne, 2013). The light dawned on my friend and me simultaneously: Diapering could be applied, metaphorically, to writing of all kinds.

I thought immediately of my clients suffering through piles of higher and deeper (PhD) university instructions and rubrics, research articles, multipage handouts, endless PowerPoints meant to help, nonstop lists of to-dos, and seventeen contradictory research method books. They—you—become paralyzed, not knowing where to point your pen or cursor.

The Diaper Method (DM) can save you, especially with a dissertation. The DM is not complex or mysterious but almost embarrassingly simple. For example, in number 2 above, you chose an easy subhead. Whether on paper or your computer screen, isolate this subhead. If you print out your chapter subheads, cover everything else on the page, above and below, with a large scrap of paper, Post-Its, or leftover piece of flatbread. If you're on a screen, press Control + Enter so this subhead is the only thing on the page.

Now you can concentrate only on what you see. Start writing. Your goal is to create text for this subhead only. When you finish, whether or not you intuit that the subhead will require more, move the diaper so it reveals only your next choice. That's it.

How this method helps: The Diaper Method is the equivalent of dissertation blinders; you focus only on the task before you. At the same time, you are handling those horrible thoughts of overwhelm and endlessness (see also Jain, 2011). You're at least knocking off *something*. More—you begin to feel an unaccustomed (sweet) sense of achievement and allow yourself a little excitement at your progress.

7) Ignore Your Inner Writing Judge

We all have one, whatever the form or persona, which blares deafeningly or whispers insidiously barrages of self-condemnation at what you've just written. To silence this tyrant and its judgment of "Drivel!" repeat to yourself: "It's only my first draft!" My client Luke emailed me recently: "When I looked at my draft today, I came away disgusted." Then he wrote wisely, "I know it's only part of the process."

How this method helps: You recognize that (a) we all have the Inner Judge and (b) its rantings are part of the process of writing. (c) Recognizing these truths, you don't have to give that bully any power. You have at least two ways of taming it.

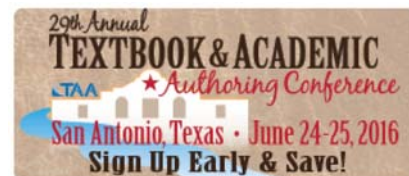
8) Tame Your Inner Judge

To silence that relentless Inner Judge, you can shout it back down. But you may have to do a lot of shouting. A good way to assuage it is to jot notes to yourself as you go. When I've just written a particularly loathsome sentence and the Judge rages, I type right after the offending passage: "FIX." When I notice heinous repetitions, like starting three consecutive sentences with the same word, I write "REP!" Or if a phrase is too weak or flowery, or I'm trying too hard to be literary or cute, I add "GET BETTER!" If you must know, my first draft of this article was littered with such notes.

How this method helps: The notes help you to keep going in the face of all those Judge pronouncements. ("This is terrible. I don't know what I'm talking about. Gotta throw it all out.") You're telling yourself and your Judge that you *do* know that the current writing is not your best and you promise to come back in the next draft to FIX, delete the REPs, or GET BETTER.

9) Save It

As bad as you think a draft is, save it. Save and back up all your drafts, electronically and printed out, whatever



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makes you feel most secure. I have two external backups for everything and can sleep at night. You can always delete later—a few months after graduation or publication.

How this method helps: You have the material to refer back to and retrieve some particularly brilliant phrase or insight you remember from an old draft. You defend against electronic catastrophes. You can sleep at night.

10) Keep All Your Literature and References

Keep all the pdfs and print versions of your literature and references. This practice will save you hours of frustrated searching (“Now where *did* I see that?”). After my client Margie handed in a research paper, she rashly threw out a carton of articles she used. When we came to her dissertation, on the same topic, she had to hunt again for everything in multiple databases.

When in doubt, or you think you’re finished, keep it all anyway. You can always purge later, much later.

How this method helps: Even if you have to paw through stacks of stapled articles, you’ve got them. Or if you have to use your computer “search” function and scan through 300 pdfs, you’ll eventually find what you want. Another amazing bonus I have experienced and clients have related: As you’re hunting through the literature, striking passages in a given article catch your eye. You know they’re perfect for something, even if you don’t yet quite know what. But make a note or a file of the passages, and have faith that you’ll be able to use them in another article or book.

11) Trust Your Inner Mentor

Yes, you have one. The opposite of the Inner Judge, your Inner Mentor (IM) has been called your intuition, internal guidance, inner voice, spirit, higher power, soul, even your heart or gut. It has more power than your chair, the dean of your school, the journal editor-in-chief, and even the guy who issues your annual parking sticker.

Ask and listen to your IM. Trust it to supply ideas and sequences. The description of writing by the American author E. L. Doctorow reminds me of this trust: “[I]t’s like driving a car at night; you never see further than your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way” (quoted in Plimpton, 1986, para. 20). Your IM knows. Access it with a little meditation—two minutes, one, thirty seconds. Ask, and then see and do what’s in front of you. You can make the whole trip. Trust it.

How this method helps: You develop confidence in your IM. You develop the habit of turning to it and may find it strangely comforting, not to mention reliable. This confidence doesn’t mean you skip the steps of research, reading, underlining, outlining, cogitating, and all the other intellectual footwork s needed. But that confidence does mean you can turn to your IM at any point and be assured of answers.

For your writing hitches at any juncture, use these eleven pointers, or any combination you gravitate to. As you put these methods into effect, you’ll likely find you are less anxious about the writing and it will go more smoothly. And—creative miracle!—you will be getting more and more words on the page.

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Dissertation coach, editor, scholarly and mainstream writing consultant, author, and spiritual counselor, Noelle has published over 300 pieces in print and online venues, including *Author Magazine*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *Children’s Book Insider*, *Graduate Schools Magazine*, *GradShare*, *InnerSelf*, *Inspire Me Today*, *Transformation Magazine*, *Unity Magazine*, *Women in Higher Education*, *Women on Writing*, *Writer’s Digest*, and *The Writer*. With a Ph.D. from Columbia University, Noelle has for 30 years helped doctoral candidates wrestle their dissertations to completion (finally). Based on her practice, her *Challenges in Writing Your Dissertation: Coping with the Emotional, Interpersonal, and Spiritual Struggles* (Rowman & Littlefield Education, September 2015) addresses students’ often overlooked or ignored but crucial nonacademic difficulties that can seriously prolong their agony. [See the PowerPoint teaser here](#). In Noelle’s *Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams* (Unity Books, 2011), she draws examples from her academic consulting and other aspects of life to help readers release regrets and



reach lifelong yearnings. Visit Noelle at www.trustyourlifenow.com

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