Writing about Learning and Teaching

in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations across a Range of Genres

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CHAPTER 23

ALLOTTING TIME AND CHOOSING SPACE TO WRITE

The Importance of Figuring Out What Works for You

> *I urge my colleagues and students to leave behind their hair shirts of scholarly guilt when they enter the house of writing. Productivity, it turns out, is a broad church that tolerates many creeds. (Sword 2016, 320-21)*

As Helen Sword implies in the above quote, everyone experiences the conditions for and processes of writing in a different way, and productivity can result from all of them. Building on this earlier work, Sword identifies the "BASE" habits of successful writing practice: discipline and persistence (behavioral); craftsmanship and care (artisanal); collegiality and collaboration (social); and positivity and pleasure (emotional) (Sword 2017b).

While all these habits are important, which ones need to be foregrounded may depend on the genre you are writing in. As Ruth Healey (personal communication, July 2, 2019) notes, the genre you are writing in at any given time may affect both where and how you write:

> In approaching something that is more of a personal experience, I can smash out ideas in relatively short time frames and come back to it easily as it's all in my head already, but when I'm trying to comprehend/

> communicate more complex theoretical ideas or interpret empirical evidence, I need longer time frames.

Time and space are dimensions of reality in which we all live, yet we each experience different kinds and degrees of choice and control over them, depending on our current positions, goals, life circumstances and responsibilities, and more. Therefore, this chapter poses a series of questions that will help you discern which time frames, spaces, and habits work best for you as a writer.

Allotting Time to Write

Whether you are a senior academic with lots of institutional responsibilities, a newer academic trying to develop a teaching and writing persona, a professional staff member, or a student scholar managing an undergraduate or graduate workload, creating time for writing can be a challenge.

As Paul Silvia (2018) argues, you need to *allot*—rather than *find*—time for writing by prioritizing and being creative, and that takes dedication and discipline. You may find helpful a highly structured set of steps for designating time and being productive, such as that provided by Robert Boice (1990). Chris Smith (2019) more recently found that productive writers have a system for writing, and what the system is does not matter as much as deliberately having one. As Helen Sword (2016, 320-21) reminds us, there is no one right way to make time for and manage your writing. Instead, she suggests reading books and attending workshops or courses that will make you feel more confident in your writing style and "forming collaborative relationships premised on emotional support rather than on disciplinary sanctions" (321)—points she reinforces in the "S" of her "BASE." To help yourself get clear on what might work for you in terms of allotting time to write in a regular way, consider these questions:

Are you, by nature, a morning, afternoon, or evening person?

Some people (like Alison) wake up on their own every day long before the sun comes up and are most alert and energetic at that time. Other people are "night owls" and no amount of coffee can clear

their heads for writing before midnight. What time of day is best for you? If possible, try to write at a time of day when you are at your most alert and energetic.

What is the ideal stretch of time for you to get substantive writing done?

Are you most productive and satisfied with your work when you write in short, regular bursts, do you need longer, uninterrupted stretches, or can you mix and match these options? Do you need "warm-up time" or can you jump right in? Can you do some writing tasks (e.g., checking sources and references) in short bursts (15–30 minutes between other responsibilities) and focus in longer stretches on other aspects of writing (e.g., composing, revising)? No amount of time is too small to help form yourself into a writer, provided that it is taken up regularly so that you are making steady progress week by week.

What kind of flexibility do you have in your schedule?

If you have flexibility, can you arrange your schedule so that you can designate certain, regular times for writing that fall during your most alert and energetic times and that fit with the rest of your responsibilities? If you do not have flexibility, can you identify and protect some regular times for writing?

How will you keep track of your writing?

How do you maintain the thread of writing over time if you can't write in one concentrated period? Margy MacMillan (personal communication, July 25, 2019) suggests that, at the end of periods where you have gotten a lot done, it is helpful to use a journal with entries that recap what you accomplished for when you can return to the project. What kind of weekly calendar or planner can you keep in which you commit (in writing!) to writing? How will you reward yourself for making progress? Positive psychology tells us that this is important. Promising yourself little rewards, such as a cup of coffee or a walk, when you have completed a particular task, for example, writing a page or drafting a section, can be self-motivating. Beyond daily planning, what kind of longer-term publication plan can you create for yourself (see chapter 29)?

How you respond to all these questions will help you clarify who you are as a writer (and, perhaps, how you might need to evolve), how who you are intersects with what else you need to do, and what kinds of structures you need to put into place to ensure that you find time for writing. As Pat Hutchings (personal communication, June 10, 2019) notes, "I have increasingly heard people talking about writing as a practice—i.e., something with routines and rituals, like yoga or Tai Chi or prayer perhaps." This point links to several of the points of Helen Sword's (2017b) "BASE," including the behaviors of discipline and persistence, the artisanal habits of craftsmanship and care, and the emotional habits of positivity and pleasure. What does or could your writing practice look like?

Choosing Space to Write

How your writing space feels matters, unless you are like Kelly with two young children (see Our Perspectives 23.1), in which case time is more important than space. Some people write best in bustling cafés and others in secluded silence, but there is more to what makes a space conducive to writing than noise level. Also, if you have the luxury of choice, consider aesthetics, temperature, lighting, and other atmospheric qualities when you choose a space to write.

To help yourself get clear on what might work for you in terms of choosing space to write, consider these questions:

What qualities of space do you need for writing?

Which spaces draw you, make you feel able to focus, inspire you, or otherwise are conducive to writing? Do you have access to your own space, or do you carve out an area within a larger shared space?

What else is in the space?

Does clutter bother you and, if so, can you clear it out? Can you decorate the space to make it your own? Do you have a comfortable chair? A desk at the right height? How a space is filled can support or hinder your writing efforts.

What kind of lighting helps you write?

A space that has insufficient light to illuminate what you are reading or composing is obviously not conducive to writing, but neither is a space that is too bright or has artificial lighting that makes a buzzing sound or some such distraction. Helen Sword (2016, 321; see also 2017b) has long argued for seeking out writing venues "filled with light and air."

How you respond to all these questions will help you clarify what you need in terms of physical environment as a writer. Having some choice in creating your writing space is part of a larger sense of agency you need to develop as a writer, even if you have to carve out a space that is less than ideal.

Our Perspectives 23.1

Times and spaces we find for writing

Kelly: My life is crazy with two small kids at home and a work schedule filled with weekly meetings and teaching blocks. So long spans of time for writing or week-long writing retreats/vacations are not possible. All I need for writing is myself and something to write on. For example, I once wrote an editorial using a basic notepad app on my phone in between infant feedings. After a month, I had the bones of the piece drafted. If I had waited for the right lighting and ambience, well, I would still be waiting. For years, I harbored the dream of place, space, and time for writing, and it was not helpful for me. Now, I prioritize writing—not planning the space and time for writing. I also accept that it is not possible for me to write every day, yet I can write almost anywhere when I have the time. I do schedule one work day per week for writing (taken over by other tasks 60% of the time), and I can sit for six hours straight writing before hunger and bathroom breaks disrupt me.

Mick: Throughout my career I've always done my writing at home. Now that I am independent, I am based at home. I rarely start work before 9am and contrary to many of the time management guides,

I like to clear as many emails as possible before I start reading or writing. Sometimes that means waiting until after lunch. I appreciate a late afternoon siesta, as this gives me the energy to work for three or four more hours in the evening. Weekends are often the most productive times as there are fewer emails! However, it's not all work. I also take the dogs for a walk and play tennis when I am at home. I work best in my study at my desk where I overlook the garden, though on a nice summer day I'll take my laptop and work in the garden. I travel a lot, and I find that train journeys can be quite productive, as long as I remember to take my headphones to listen to classical music and block out distracting noise. I keep mundane tasks, such as preparing a list of references, for while I watch TV.

Alison: I do my best writing in the (very) early mornings, in the solitude of any silent space I can sit with my laptop computer. I am a morning person, and I often spend a couple of hours between 5:00 (or even 4:00) and 7:00 working on my writing before the sun rises and before my daughter wakes up. I can also spend full days writing and need to remind myself to take breaks, walk outside, eat something. I need absolute silence to write (well, wind and rain don't bother me, but almost everything else does), so busy times of day and loud places like cafés or airports really don't work for me.

Your perspective: What times and spaces do you find for writing?

Over to You

Time and space are dimensions over which you will have varying degrees of control. What can you do to maximize your use of the time and space available to you? Keep in mind that writing for different genres might affect where and how you write. For example, if you are writing about more personal experiences that are in your head already, you might need less time; if you are trying to comprehend or communicate more complex theoretical ideas or interpret empirical evidence, you might need more time. Consider, too, where you are

based—in a single- or multi-campus university—or whether you want to connect with colleagues at nearby campuses. Do you want to share space or work on a non-home campus in a pre-booked room nice and quietly where no one can find you?

Addressing the following questions may help inform your decisions about allotting time and making space to write:

- What do you know about yourself as a writer? Are you, by nature, a morning, afternoon, or evening person? What is the ideal stretch of time for you to get substantive writing done?
- How does who you are as a writer intersect with your life and how you keep track of your writing?
- How can you make steady progress week by week?
- What qualities of space do you need for writing, and what is or could be in your writing space?