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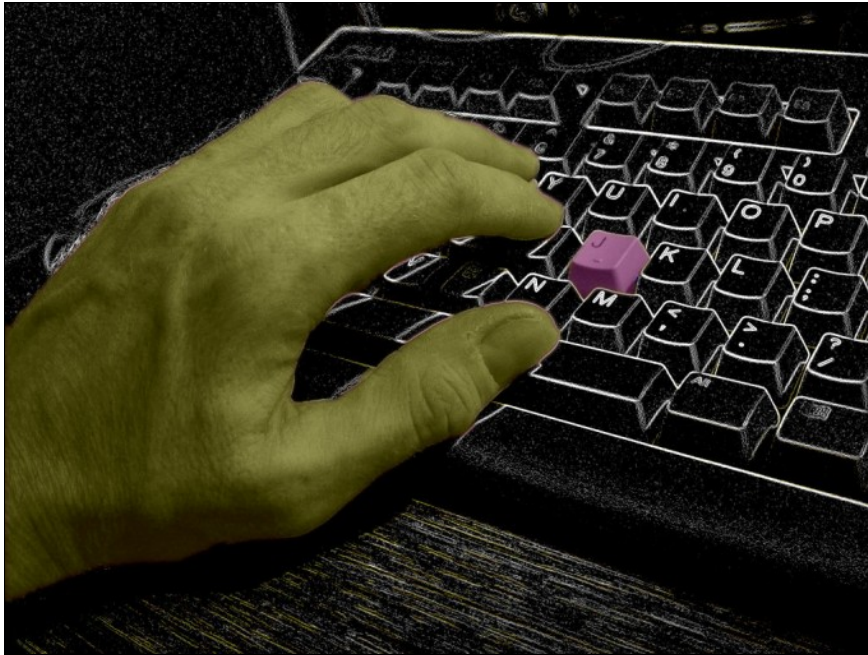
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ProfHacker
Teaching, tech, and productivity.

February 10, 2014 by Ryan Cordell

Writing 20 Minutes Every. Single. Day.

(http://www.flickr.com/photos/josefstuefer/5137407/sizes/l/)You might think that after writing a dissertation, I would have pretty good writing habits. Well, you *might* think that if you were not also an academic and familiar with the continuous obstacles that challenge regular writing. Contrary to political posturing that claims academics only work during the hours they literally sit in a classroom—"only a few hours a week!"—a host of other duties fill our days—preparing for classes, advising undergraduates, supervising graduate students, reviewing others' scholarship, administering programs and team projects, serving on committees, performing research, preparing grant proposals, writing grant reports, and grading, grading, grading, grading. While many of these activies involve writing, they all crowd out time for "writing," which is for many of us shorthand for "writing up my research," whether that means for a journal article, a monograph, a research website, or for some other medium. One indication of how much academics fret over writing would be the sheer number of ProfHacker articles devoted to the topic! (http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/tag/writing)

In graduate school, I was a binge writer. I'd research for weeks and weeks and then write entire chapters in a few (exhausting) marathon days. But there's significant evidence that the most productive writers compose not in binge sessions, but consistently, writing each day. Since starting a faculty position at my new institution, I've certainly struggled to find time for that kind of writing. I begin each month and each week and each day with the best intentions, but entire weeks disappear in a morass of other duties without a new word appearing in Scrivener (http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/scrivener-scrivening-scriverastic/23026). I've tried solutions like 750Words.com (http://chronicle.com/blogPost/Writers-Boot-Camp-Using-7/23383/), but just never dialed into their systems. But I need to write. My institution expects significant research production, which means in my field writing, writing, writing.

Fortunately my institution is also working to support faculty in meeting that goal. This

semester I've been fortunate to join a new writing group comprised of faculty from my college who have all committed to finishing a new article by semester's end. We're working from Wendy Laura Belcher's book _Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks_ (http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/141295701X/ref=as_li_ss_tl? ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=141295701X&linkCode=as2&tag=ryacorsonlhom-20), which is written for graduate students working toward their first articles, but nonetheless is full of fantastic, practical advice and activities to help anyone just keep writing.

I've been writing with this group for three weeks now, and I'm seeing real results. I've produced more prose in the past three weeks than in the previous three months at least. Here are the principles—some from our book, some I've cobbled together on my own—that have been working well to keep _me_ writing within the context of this writing group:

1. **Accountability**. This isn't a new idea; indeed, it's the idea behind most writing groups. But it's certainly true that I have a harder time putting off my daily writing when I know I'll report to the group each Tuesday. It's not even that the group is exceptionally judgmental: thus far we've all had struggles, have shared those struggles, and have been very supportive. But the simple fact of accounting to others for my work has driven me to do the work. It's easy to justify your failures to yourself; it's much harder to justify your failures to others, even when those others are all understanding.

2. **Scheduling**. I list this after accountability for a reason. I've tried to literally schedule writing time before by adding it to my calendar. And then promptly scheduling over it when people requested a meeting. Or doing something else during my scheduled writing time. Because justifications. This time around, though, the 12-week program we're following requires you to schedule at least 15 minutes of writing time each weekday. These times must be added to the calendar and cannot be used for anything but writing. And because I'm accountable to the group I haven't been fudging with this time. I have a few times moved my writing window from the morning to the afternoon, but I have been able to treat that window as an nonnegotiable fact of each day.

3. **Limits**. One of the most interesting suggestions Belcher makes in _Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks_ (http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/141295701X/ref=as_li_ss_tl? ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=141295701X&linkCode=as2&tag=ryacorsonlhom-20) is that you should set a hard window on your daily writing. In other words, you should not only write for _at least_ 15 minutes, but you should also set an upper limit, deciding that you will write _no more than_ 30 minutes, for instance. Her reason is simple but insightful: you should not wait until you are stymied and frustrated to stop writing, but should stop while you're still writing well and feeling good about the work you're producing. That feeling of productivity will then make it much easier to start writing again the next day. This has been the hardest principle for me to follow, but when I have it's proven wise. When I stop writing even though I have ideas for what's next, starting again the next day is simple—I start with those "what's next" ideas, or often with new and better ideas that formed overnight. When I write until exhausted and out of ideas—then I'm hesitant to jump in again the next day. So I've tried to stick to 20-30 minutes each day. When I get to the end of that window, I stop, even mid-paragraph. It's surprisingly freeing, and I strongly advise you try it.

4. **Momentum**. In order to make the most of my writing window, I've decided that my 20-30 minutes is only for getting words into my document. It's not for looking up quotes, or tracking down citations, or reading secondary materials. All of those activities can distract from writing while feeling like very productive uses of time. In other words, they're easy to justify when you're accounting for why you only wrote two pages this week. To avoid falling down those rabbit holes, then, I've been writing lots of "CITATION HERE" and "QUOTATION FROM SMITH HERE" as I compose, inserting placeholders for that perfect quote I know exists without stopping writing to track it down. Of course, I will at some point have to fill in those placeholders, but I suspect doing so will be much easier in the context of a nearly-

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finished piece. This strategy, too, has proved wonderfully freeing.

How about you? **What strategies do you use to get writing done on a regular basis?** Tell us your writing strategies in the comments.

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