

# MIND YOUR WRITING

Exploring Academic Writing

Christian Wymann

### **About the author**

Christian Wymann provides writing coaching with his company *Mind Your Writing Schreibberatung*. He also works as a writing coach for the *University Library* in Bern, Switzerland. He received his PhD in sociology from Copenhagen Business School. His two *books* on academic writing have been published by Barbara Budrich Publishers. He lives in Bern, Switzerland.



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# Introduction

From April 2013 until March 2016 I wrote a blog called *Mind Your Writing*. The blog gave me the opportunity to reflect on my work as a writing consultant. After dozens of blog posts, I decided to go one step further and write books for academic writers (see Wymann 2015, 2016). Whether writing short blog posts or longer books, writing always confronted me with various challenges – the same challenges every writer faces now and then.

As a writing consultant for academic writers<sup>1</sup>, I considered facing these challenges myself and reflecting them in written form to be a part of my work. The blog was the best and quickest outlet to do so. I knew that people all over the world could possibly read my posts – although only a few chose to do so. It gave me a sense of an audience and forced me to write as clearly as possible.

In this ebook, I will present a selection of the blog posts in a more readable format. I have adapted some of them, since some information was outdated or because links like those to other blog posts are unnecessary in an ebook.

In part one, I look at how mindfulness can help us to be more conscious about our writing. Part two considers different aspects of the writing process, from start to finish. Part three turns to the challenges of academic prose, while part four is concerned with how we deal with academic genres. In part five, I present how famous researchers from different disciplines work and how they

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<sup>1</sup> I use „academic“ and „scientific“ synonymously.

think about writing. Part six summarizes what we need to keep in mind as academic writers.

### **Acknowledgments**

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## Part One: Mindful Writing

These days, mindfulness seems to be ever-present. Neuroscience has reported on new findings from research on the effects and benefits of mindfulness and meditation practice. The media turn these reports into stories. And – a sure sign of its arrival in the “mainstream” – companies and organizations offer their employees mindfulness programs or hire companies to do them. Whether this is a current management fad or a long-term transformation in society I can’t say. But, what’s most important is that, for many people, the practice of mindfulness has changed their lives for the better.

What I’m interested in is how people integrate mindfulness into their everyday and work life. And that’s the reason why I want to explore the potential of mindfulness for (academic) writers. As usual, I won’t be the first person thinking and writing about the connection between mindfulness and writing. So far, I’ve found a few websites for fiction writers and two books. Dinty W. Moore, a fiction and non-fiction writer and professor of creative writing, published *The Mindful Writer: Noble Truths of the Writing Life* (2012). He mainly comments on quotations from different writers in the light of Buddhist teachings, such as mindfulness. Peter Boice, a psychologist who did extensive research on writing problems, wrote the book *Advice for New Faculty Members: Nihil Nimus* (2000). Boice writes about mindful writing as a way to avoid writing either in binges or not at all. He guides writers to a happier and less

stressful writing life in academia.

But what is mindfulness, you might ask. There are different definitions of mindfulness, depending on the background of its author. Buddhist scholars draw on different “sutras”, the Buddha’s discourses. With the knowledge of the Buddhist perspectives, others adapt the definitions to contemporary, secular life. Jon Kabat-Zinn has pioneered such a view on mindfulness. He founded the Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program in the 1970s. Others don’t rely on the Buddhist tradition, but define it in relation to psychology. For our present purposes, I won’t discuss the debates and definitions. Rather, I would like to suggest a slim working definition of what mindfulness can mean in order to use it to explore its potential in the context of writing; other aspects I’ll leave aside for the moment.

To be mindful means to be aware of what is happening in the present moment. While it may sound easy, you’ll soon find out that it isn’t at all. Usually, we are not aware of the present as it unfolds but are occupied with the past or future. Being aware is one aspect of mindfulness. Another aspect is suspending judgment of what we experience and, for the time being, accepting what is. Again, our mind usually produces a running commentary about what we experience. We judge others and ourselves. I find it surprising how my mind constantly judges what is happening. Sometimes I even notice that I’m judging my judging. The suspension of judgment, however, doesn’t mean suspending it all the time. It means being aware of how we judge and to uncover our mind’s commentary. Being mindful, thus, makes it possible for us to be aware



of the experiences and events in a given moment, without immediately judging them as good, neutral or bad. We are aware of the present moment as long as possible. We will lose ourselves in our thoughts again after a fraction of a second or a few seconds. Mindfulness, however, means coming back to the present moment as soon as we notice that we have gotten lost. One of the original meanings of mindfulness is “to remember”. Thus, mindfulness means remembering to come back to the present moment and being aware of what’s happening in and around us.

If I recall correctly, Jon Kabat-Zinn wrote somewhere (probably in his book *Full Catastrophe Living*, 1991) that being mindful is simple but not easy. You can find out yourself by being mindful of your breathing (the classical “anchor” for meditation). Try to be aware of your breathing without interfering with it and without judging it (“Why is it so shallow/deep? It shouldn’t be so fast.” etc.). Just try to be with your breath. Whenever you notice that you are thinking about breakfast, the tasks you should do, or last year’s holidays, you come back to your breath again. But don’t judge yourself if you can’t focus on your breath for more than a second. Simply be aware of your breath and then, if you get distracted, be aware of being distracted and come back again to the present moment – time and again.

As simple as it sounds and as hard as it may be, mindfulness has some potential that we can draw on for writing. One of the potentials is how to deal with distractions during a writing session. Mindfulness may also help us develop our concentration, to be aware of our writing habits, and it may support us when we are faced

with criticism. I want to explore these aspects of mindfulness for writers in the following pages.

### **Cultivating Writing and Mindfulness**

To be effective and productive writers, we need to make writing a habit. To be mindful people, we need to make mindfulness a habit as well. Both writing and mindfulness can be learned and developed. We can make them part of our everyday and professional lives. To be able to write well and to be mindful, however, we have to cultivate them both.

In the case of writing, we should commit to a schedule of regular writing sessions, whether or not we feel like writing or have the desired equipment. Only by writing do we learn how to write good prose, well crafted articles or dissertations. Although we have to think about what and how to write, we won't improve our skills or develop our voice as writers unless we sit down and write.

Being mindful is similar. Thinking about how mindful I would like to be won't help, unless I try to be mindful time and again. As I suggested above, mindfulness means being aware of one's experiences in a given moment, while not judging them (including bodily feelings, emotions, and thoughts). Being mindful, we try to be aware and accept what is at the moment. Later, of course, we can try to change our ingrained reactions and automatic patterns of experience by means of reflection. But first, we have to notice what is happening by being mindful. In contrast to writing, however, we don't make a schedule that tells us to be mindful for an hour at a certain time (only if you want to meditate). We also don't need

special equipment. All mindfulness demands from us is that we try to be aware of what is happening as often as possible. To become more mindful and to develop this quality of our minds, we need to cultivate it.

We can be mindful anytime and anywhere, from right after waking up in the morning to the moment before we fall asleep in the evening. In order to make it easier to remember to be mindful, we can choose specific actions or situations in our daily life that we connect with mindfulness. Aside from opening doors, brushing teeth, walking to work, or talking to someone, I would like to suggest that we might also be mindful while writing. We thereby establish a connection between two habits that demand a similarly disciplined and regular approach. From the perspective of writing, we take the scheduled session as an opportunity to write with a clear, focused and awake mind. From the perspective of mindfulness, writing represents a recurrent action that allows us to remember to be aware of what is happening. Both habits can feed on the other as in a symbiotic relationship (of course, this doesn't apply to writing and mindfulness alone).

Cultivating both writing and mindfulness, whether separately or in connection, remains a challenge for most people most of the time. Perfection, though, isn't the goal. Just stick to your schedule, whether you meet the planned goals or not, and stick to being mindful whether or not you succeed for more than a few seconds. To become good writers and mindful people, we have to persevere even in the face of bad moods or adverse circumstances. Then we will notice how our writing and mindfulness improve, and we will be able to notice and enjoy what we have

accomplished. Cultivation of both, then, becomes an end in itself.

### **Clumsy Fingers and other Sensations**

Mindfulness does not depend on special circumstances or experiences. We can be mindful of everything we experience, whether positive, negative, or neutral. That is why it may help us to better understand our experiences of the writing process. Today, I want to talk about mindfulness of the bodily sensations we encounter while writing.

When I transcribed interviews some years ago I started to become aware of the bodily sensations involved in writing. As usual, my experiences run on autopilot, only thinking about them or watching them more closely if something goes wrong. While transcribing, however, I tried to be aware of how it feels to write. This kind of exercise allowed me to be mindful because I would listen and simply type what I heard. Transcribing becomes more or less an automatic task. Although I try to avoid multitasking, I succeeded in both transcribing and being mindful of the bodily sensations I experienced (this is more demanding when I write new text).

I discovered that my hand movements felt different during the first hour of writing than they did afterwards. During the first hour, my fingers moved smoothly over the keyboard, rarely typing wrong letters. Afterwards, however, my fingers started to feel stiff, producing more mistakes. While I first wrote without great effort, it became more demanding and, due to the increasing rate of mistakes, more irritating the longer I transcribed. Of

course, this wasn't the case every day. Some days, my fingers felt clumsy right from the start.

By becoming aware of how my fingers feel when I write, I got some insights about when it might be wise to stop typing. If I constantly mistype and, as a consequence, become irritated about my inability to type the way I expect (including the mental commentary judging my clumsy fingers), it might be time to take a break or stop writing for the day. Since I write for about an hour a day, my fingers don't irritate me that often.

We can also be mindful of other bodily sensations, because it is not only the fingers but also many other body parts that help or obstruct our writing. Usually, I become aware of sensations when certain parts feel tense or different than I expect. The shoulders, buttocks, face, feet, or the eyes may all produce such sensations. Being aware of them, accepting the experience of a sensation without trying to change and judge it right away, enables us to find out why it feels the way it does. If we notice the signals our body sends, we might be able to change bad postures or habitual movements and learn new and ergonomic ones. Or, we become aware of them when the time has come before we get tired, irritated, and tense. If we learn to stop before our bodily experiences of writing become negative, we won't connect writing with fatigue, stiff fingers, and an aching head and therefore try to avoid writing. Rather, we connect writing to positive bodily experiences. While not every writing session feels the same way, we know how to interpret our body's signals by being mindful. Getting irritated by them won't help to improve our situation. But when we try to be aware of your

body while writing, we may learn something about our habits and ourselves. Only with these new insights can we change things for the better.

### **Being Aware of Thoughts**

Above, I wrote that it is possible to be mindful of everything we experience, whether positive, negative, or neutral. This includes our thoughts, which shape our view of the world. Thoughts can emerge as daydreams, evaluations, or a running commentary of what we experience. Usually, we don't notice our thought process or its content; we are immersed in it and often swept away by it. Mindfulness, however, allows us to be aware of our thoughts and see them in a different light - as thoughts that come and go. It also allows us to change negative or unwholesome thoughts into positive or wholesome ones.

We have to think to write, otherwise we won't be able to put any words on paper. Ideally, we know what we will want to write about in our next writing session the day before at the latest. Knowing what to write about we can focus on how to say it. Nevertheless, we seldom think exclusively about a specific topic; our mind produces many thoughts unrelated to our writing topic.

These other thoughts manifest as daydreams and other preoccupations, which just pop up whether we like it or not. They may occupy our minds for several seconds or minutes until we notice that our thoughts wandered. We usually react to our wandering mind by judging ourselves as unable to concentrate; we tend to mentally punish ourselves for self-distraction.

When we practice mindfulness, however, we take a different approach. When we notice the presence of thoughts unrelated to the task at hand, we become aware of it and, without judging, return to the task. Whenever we lose our focus and notice this, we refocus – time and again. We don't need to punish ourselves for losing control over our minds, because we can't control them anyway. All we can do is notice and accept the wandering thoughts and refocus. By being aware of our thoughts, we come back to the present moment and don't get swept further away by daydreams etc.

Some thoughts are positive and enjoyable, yet still distracting (“This paper will be widely read and win an award...”). Many other thoughts, however, are negative and turn out to be obstacles.

Perfectionism and the inner censor represent two related kinds of thoughts. The former demands that we produce perfect sentences, paragraphs, or drafts the first time and won't allow us to rewrite what we've drafted. The inner censor is the running commentary that evaluates what we write. Although we might write something, it won't ever be good enough. As soon as we write some words or a sentence, the censor judges the work and tells us to revise right away. Instead of writing what we have in mind and not caring about mistakes or bad sentences, both kinds of thoughts hinder us to produce text.

The problem with these and other kinds of thoughts is that we get swept away by them. We believe the inner censor or buy into our perfectionism and let ourselves get impeded. The good news is, however, that we don't have to. As daydreams, evaluations and so on, they are only

thoughts that arise in our mind and, sooner or later, disappear again. If we believe and hold on to them, they will dominate our minds. If we are aware of them, accept them for what they are, and let them go, they won't stay long. No doubt, when we write they will emerge again and again. Our job is to be aware of perfectionism, the inner censor and other obstructing thoughts as soon as possible. If we do that each time they arise, they will soon start to emerge less frequently, until they don't bother us anymore.

First, we need to accept that these kinds of thoughts are normal while writing. In a second step, however, we need to do ourselves the favor of not believing them anymore. When thoughts don't help our writing, we should take care of them with mindfulness. With patience and perseverance, we will exchange the habit of censoring or impeding ourselves with the habit of being mindful of our thoughts. We won't try to shut down our thoughts, because that's impossible. Instead, we will try to control them so that they support rather than obstruct our work.

### **Dealing with Emotions**

Writers often struggle with fear, self-doubt, guilt, discouragement, and other emotions that may hinder their writing – accomplished novelists, published and not-yet-published scholars, and students alike. Perfectionist thoughts, for example, may lead to fear of failure and eventually to writing blocks. As Ralph Keyes shows for novelists and poets in *The Courage to Write: How Writers Transcend Fear* (2003a), though, fear and other strong emotions can not only impede writers, they may also be a



source for writing. Instead of fighting anxiety, writers use the power of these emotions for creative purposes.

Emotions often emerge in combination with thoughts and bodily sensations. This may make it difficult to differentiate between them. To deal with both the negative and positive emotions while writing, however, we can use our awareness to identify them.

For example, when we notice resistance to writing when our schedule requires, we can be aware of what we feel like in this situation. There will be thoughts that tell us why it is okay not to write – and as suggested above, we don't have to believe these excuses. At the same time, we may feel anxious about the scheduled task and would like to postpone it to a time when we "feel like it". Or, we have self-doubts about our writing skills.

Whatever our emotional state in this particular situation, mindfulness allows us to just observe it. We don't need to fight it or try to change our emotions into positive, better ones. If we feel anxious or discouraged, then that's how it is in that particular moment. If the emotions don't lose their grip on us, at least they won't get worse. Instead of fighting the present state, we accept it for the moment.

When we are not in the grip of negative emotions, our writing isn't dependent on them and we won't wait until they're gone. The same applies to strong, positive emotions. We have to be able to write independently of positive moods such as joy, happiness, or "feeling like it". If we wait until we are in the mood to write, we may not write as much. Even if we feel motivated and write with joy, we should not let ourselves be swept away by this emotional state. It may lead to writing in binges and to a

dependence on good moods. It's certainly okay to enjoy the happy writing sessions, but we shouldn't long for them.

Mindfulness allows us to notice strong emotions, whether positive or negative, and to deal with them non-reactively and nonjudgmentally. For the time being, we accept them for what they are - emotions or moods that arise and disappear. With awareness, we don't fight, suppress, or indulge our emotions; we don't give them more fuel.

While different emotions will still arise, they may not occupy our attention for as long as they did in the past. And if we're lucky, they may not visit us as frequently anymore or even stay away completely. But whatever the outcome may be, we practice mindfulness of our emotions while writing to be independent from them. Then, we will be able to write as scheduled, whether we are feeling sad, anxious, and doubtful, or elated, happy, and motivated. We don't have to wait for emotional states to arise or disappear - we write as planned.

To be aware of our emotions and moods, as well as our bodily sensations and thoughts, we need to cultivate mindfulness on a regular basis. Don't judge yourself if you can't be mindful more than once or twice during a writing session. Be patient and keep on coming back to the present moment. Practicing mindfulness will increase your ability to be aware of what is happening - until it constitutes another habit.

### **Receiving Feedback and Criticism**

My heart beats faster, I get nervous and anxious;

defensive thoughts arise and cloud my mind - that's how I usually feel in the first few seconds when receiving feedback and criticism on a text. When I receive the proofread blog post, these symptoms start to arise even before I've opened the file.

You might know similar symptoms when you get feedback on your work. But you might also be unaware of such symptoms and not worry about them much, since you have to worry about the comments on your concepts, empirical research, or interpretations. Depending on how flattering or dismissive the feedback turns out to be, the symptoms will intensify or be of a different kind. Critical and negative comments may discourage, or worse, for longer periods; positive comments may motivate.

I remember well the moment when I received the first assessment of my PhD thesis. The committee needed longer than planned so I was already anxious about their evaluation. After reading the first few sentences in the e-mail from the head of the doctoral school, I knew that the committee wasn't yet satisfied with my thesis. They gave me a few months more to revise parts of it. That, of course, was the first attack on my scholarly ego. Now, my symptoms were in full bloom. I couldn't believe what I read, because I had expected to pass the first assessment. After hesitating, I opened the assessment report. Still nervous and anxious, my body tensing and producing my usual stress signals, my mind was in a debate with the comments and criticism by the committee. With certain comments I agreed - above all, the acknowledging and flattering ones. With many critical comments, however, I did not agree at all. How could they have possibly had

such a different perspective to mine? Hadn't I clarified this point? How could they say this? Did they even read the entire thesis? My mind was in defensive mode.

You might remember similar experiences when receiving peer reviews on an article, a grant proposal, or individual chapters you have given to your PhD supervisor. Do you also remember whether and how you dealt with your reactions? It is difficult not to get involved with the bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions that arise when we get criticized. When we get involved too much and identify ourselves with our work – taking a defensive position – we will make the experience worse than it has to be. When we try to be aware of our experiences, however, we may decrease the impact of the evaluation.

Whenever I can remember to do so, I try to be aware of my bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions, as I described above, when receiving feedback. Although it didn't help much in the first minutes of reading my PhD assessment, I was fully aware of what was going on in my body and mind. I wasn't able to shut down my automatic reactions. That's not the goal of mindfulness anyway. But I learned something about how I reacted and how I tried to defend myself. Whenever I feel these symptoms start to arise, I try to be mindful and try to relax at the same time. The reaction might still be the same, but my approach is different.

Even if it sounds impossible to change a natural reaction pattern, we can take the edge off. We try not to over identify with our work so that we can accept and appreciate the feedback. We don't have to agree with every comment, but we can approach them with a non-

reactive attitude. Instead of getting too emotional and dismissive, we see the feedback as a good opportunity to refine our thinking and writing.

After the first shock and a few days after reading the assessment, I started to plan how I would act on the criticism that I needed to deal with. It didn't take me long to rewrite and expand some sections. I still didn't agree with most of the committee's comments, but they allowed me to strengthen my arguments and defend my choices in the place most appropriate: in my thesis and not just in my mind. While I expected the committee to discuss the same arguments at the PhD defense, they didn't do so. They accepted that I hadn't entirely agreed with them and that I therefore kept on defending my position. The final assessment still contains many of their original criticism, but I can live with it. I'm sure that the symptoms might return should I reread the assessment of my PhD thesis. But by being mindful, I know what I'm dealing with and don't take it too personally. The symptoms arise and, sooner or later, will disappear.

## **Part Two: The Writing Process from Start to Finish**

### **No Recipe for Writing**

Sometimes I'm asked to name exemplary scholarly texts so that people can see what academic writing should look like. While reading good prose does help to get a feel for what might work, it shouldn't lead to blind imitation of style, text structure, or any other textual element. I'll use the metaphor of cooking to explain why this isn't such a good idea.

Imagine that I gave you a famous cook's recipe. Even though you may not have much experience in cooking complicated meals, you might be eager to try the chef's recipe. It's a recipe from an established cook, so it should work out well, right? Well, if you don't have the necessary experience with the many ingredients, their interplay, the flavors, and procedures, the meal will probably not come out as expected. The recipe doesn't guarantee you that the meal will smell and taste good. Nor does a recipe for academic texts guarantee you anything.

I'm reluctant to name good authors or texts for several reasons. First of all, not everybody looks for the same things in a text. I might like a textual feature that another person wouldn't consider important. For example, I like a simple and plain writing style; others favor a more complicated style that allegedly gives credit to the topic's

complexity. I like for authors to come up with their own text structure; others favor established structures such as the IMRAD scheme.

Second, while I recommend reading to know more about writing, I wouldn't recommend imitating someone else. Each text you write brings along its own context. An article in one journal might require different features than one in another journal. Each writing task poses new challenges you have to be able to deal with. Using a text template you take from someone else won't solve your problems. Because a template or text recipe might not be adequate for the task, you may end up with more problems than you had to begin with and risk failing the assignment. If we had reliable recipes, writing wouldn't be that hard. Of course, you can orient yourself on established genre features, citation styles, and other textual aspects, but they won't guarantee your success. That leads me to the third reason for my reluctance.

A recipe would suggest that you just have to follow a specific procedure and then you will have your well-written text; that all of the big and small decisions can be anticipated by the recipe. This approach might work for cooking at home, but it doesn't for writing. You, the writer, have to make all the big and small decisions about your text. That's the reason why writing can be so hard at times - including the decision of how to proceed when you're stuck. You have to learn how to make proper decisions while writing and there's simply no recipe that will relieve you from this. You have to make them for each new writing task. One can certainly get used to this process and learn how to deal with problems that always emerge when

producing a text. So you don't have to start entirely from scratch; you can build on your experience. You will master how to handle the inevitable challenges that emerge while writing.

Instead of relying on a recipe that promises you success, make up your own mind and decide for yourself what ingredients and procedures you will need for your text. Only then will you be flexible enough to write in different contexts.

### **Why Writing?**

Students have to write texts. The quantity and lengths of those texts depend on the study program. Students either pick a pre-selected topic, or they will provide one for themselves. After handing the assignment in, the best they can expect is feedback on how they presented the topic, the use of methods, the results, or how they used the citation style. However, they may just get a grade or a pass/fail. If they pass the assignment, the next one is waiting.

I might have portrayed this too simply. But that's how it usually worked during my studies and how it worked later, when I gave assignments to students. Unfortunately, I think that is still how it works in many higher education institutions today. This system is not wrong as such. What is missing, however, is the explanation and discussion about why students need to write these texts. While they might think that they are writing in order to pass courses and get their degrees, they require much more of a basis and motivation to do so. Writing during one's studies shouldn't be reduced to learning how to write academic



papers. It shouldn't be reduced to learning how to cite other writers' texts. It needs to be justified as much more than that.

Students write in order to learn a variety of skills, which they will need for their future careers – whether they be in academia or not. They learn how to focus on a topic of appropriate size; they learn to ask questions and find answers; they learn to manage their time in order to finish a project within a given period; they learn to structure their thoughts so that others can follow their arguments; they learn how to deal with other writers' work and to participate critically in a discussion; they learn how to present their work in a proper form according to guidelines; and, all in all, students learn about a topic by using writing as a tool to acquire knowledge and transform it – writing to learn.

Long story short: Students need to write in order to prepare for future projects at work. Most work requires writing skills of some sort. Even if they never need to write an academic paper again, students need to understand that they are practicing for their future. They strengthen the skills that the professional world expects. Studying, thus, is not just about becoming an expert in one area. It means acquiring different skills that go beyond academia. Studying (and doing a PhD for that matter) is more about the way to learn new things than the things themselves.

If students know better why they are writing, they may be much more motivated to do it time and again. In that case, they wouldn't be doing the assignments for their professors, but rather for themselves and their future.

## **Making Writing Social**

Sitting at your desk all alone and typing on your keyboard doesn't feel that social. Writing, however, can be more social than you might think.

First of all, publishing your text so that other researchers may read it is a social thing. Researchers form social networks by reading, writing, and being read; they form networks of peers (hence peer feedback and peer review).

Second, you can use different forms of socializing with other researchers and writers to make writing much more social. As Rowena Murray shows in her new book *Writing in Social Spaces* (2015), these forms help writers to cultivate better writing habits, become more confident, and eventually also to be more productive. I would like to describe a few of these forms in order to give you an idea of how you can use other writers for each other's benefit.

- Writing workshops and courses, in which you meet writers with different backgrounds, allow for exchanges about a variety of writing related challenges. You learn new strategies, discuss your habits, train your language skills, and maybe practice giving and receiving feedback among peers.
- Writing groups provide a regular forum for a small group of writers who seek to exchange ideas about their writing routine and challenges on a regular basis. In these groups you can do different things: you can set writing goals and monitor them in the next session; you can discuss the challenges that emerge when you try to include writing into your already busy work schedule; you can give each other feedback on texts; or you can simply lament about

the hardships of writing and drink coffee.

- Another social form can be a writing retreat. You meet with other writers for a few days or even a week in order to get some writing done. You can organize the retreat rather strictly with a schedule for everyone. The schedule tells you when to write and for how long, when to take breaks, and when to meet with the others for discussion, peer feedback, a walk in the woods, or dinner. A retreat allows you to focus mainly on your writing, while not being disturbed by family, friends, bosses, or cellphones. You can cultivate writing in such a way that you will be able to transfer to your work life after the retreat. However, you can also choose an unstructured retreat without a fixed schedule. In any case, you can try to convince your manager at the department to organize regular writing retreats for everyone. And if you fail, you can organize one yourself and invite your colleagues.

Many writers suspect that such groups and meetings are nothing other than self-help groups for those who can't write or begin a career in academia. It all depends on how you organize such groups. Retreats, workshops, and groups can help you to become a better writer, even if you are already experienced and widely published. It can be a way to strengthen one of your core skills as a researcher.

Unfortunately, the taboo of not talking or sharing about writing seems common. Sure, not everybody likes to talk about what they do and how. But many researchers have to publish in order to keep their jobs or get new ones. Many of them are struggling with writing, finding the time

to write, understanding the expectations they face, and more. Talking about writing, listening to others, learning about alternative strategies, and using other writers to keep you motivated and productive may help you to become a more confident, competent, and well organized writer. Writing needn't be a lonely endeavor, even if you do the writing on your own.

### **No Theory Required**

When it comes to managing your time and getting your writing done, no theory or model can help you on its own. Theories and models explain why people usually manage their time. They show how people work, if they get their work done. Knowing the results of research, however, doesn't make you a better manager of your time. In my opinion and experience with dozens of writers, people learn most if they reflect upon their own habits and learn how to adapt them.

If a theory tells me, for example, that most people work best for three hours, then I've learned something about these people (a particular sample of people who have been investigated with a particular method). If I investigate my own habits and use practical tools in order to find out how to get my work done in time, I learn something about myself. Maybe, I work best when I sit down for three hours as the people from the study do. But maybe the three hours are too long or too short for my needs. In my case, it would be way too long. I work best for one hour only and still get everything done in time as planned.

Instead of giving my clients seemingly tried and true

theories and models that they should apply, I give them practical tools to find out for themselves what will work for them. When it comes to writing, no theory or model will tell you how you will work best. Only you can find out with the proper tools. Theories and models are good information to get in lectures and seminars. In writing workshops, however, you will receive the practical tools to make your own experiences.

### **The Horror of the Sabbatical**

Sabbatical sounds like the best thing that can happen to researchers: plenty of time to read and write without teaching or administration. Before someone starts a sabbatical, they typically tell me all about how much work they will be able to do and how much they are looking forward to it. After the sabbatical, their enthusiasm may have waned: they didn't get nearly as much or the right things done or perhaps did nothing at all. They are frustrated and look forward to teaching and administration – or anything else that can take them away from writing.

I'm exaggerating a bit. Nevertheless, I don't remember hearing from anyone who took a sabbatical and accomplished everything that they had intended. Having time off or being abroad presents many alternatives to writing.

Just recently, a client told me about his year abroad. He had planned to use the time to write his PhD. Big city life sometimes lured him away from his desk, but he also worked a lot. After the year, however, he had to admit that he hadn't done what he should have. His PhD was nowhere near where it should have been with so much

time on his hands. I told him that he was by no means the only one who had had this experience.

What's the problem? Many writers hope for big chunks of time to write their theses, articles or books. During the semester, with all of their other obligations, they allegedly can't find the time to write, and so they will tend to wait for the holidays or a sabbatical. But how can they use these big chunks of time when they are not used to writing regularly? Why do they think that they will have enough energy or motivation to work for hours, for several weeks, or even months without practice? Would they run a marathon without having trained for it?

Writing takes practice; writers need to cultivate a writing habit. If you already have a writing habit before starting the sabbatical, you will very likely accomplish most of the tasks you plan. If you don't know what a writing habit is and don't think that you need one - "I just write whenever I feel like it" -, then you might be in big trouble. Writers without a productive writing habit will try to work as many hours a day as possible, but will soon find out that that might not work after all.

Having a writing habit means knowing exactly when and for how long you're able to write. You know how much work you can do before your energy and motivation disappear. And you know how much work you're able to produce in a given time. Only by knowing these things can you productively plan your sabbatical and accomplish what you have set out to do. If you don't have experience with making the most of your time and discover that deficiency during the sabbatical, it might become frustrating. Although it's never too late to learn about and

change your writing habits, it shouldn't require a sabbatical to discover it.

If you want to use your sabbatical or stay abroad to the fullest, prepare yourself and plan ahead – not only what you will write about, but also when and how. Only then can you focus on getting things done. You will be able to enjoy being abroad or having some time off in addition to writing.

### **Creative Methods to Generate Ideas**

You have definitely used, or at least heard about, clustering, Mind Maps, and similar tools to collect and create ideas. We all learned about them back in school. I consider these methods as widespread cultural tools for thinking on paper. Only recently, though, did I learn about their origin.

As far as I know, Gabriele Rico was the first to present clustering in her book *Writing the Natural Way* (2000). Rico wrote about developing creativity methodically. She introduced clustering as a method to generate ideas, linking it to the insights of brain research. In her book, she also mentions Mind Maps, which were developed by Tony Buzan in Britain at around the same time (see Buzan 2006).

People often confuse the two methods of generating ideas. True, they have a lot in common and yet they differ. Clustering means freely collecting ideas that come to mind, which are connected to a key word or phrase. You don't have to worry about right or wrong – everything is valid. As you might remember, the key term in the middle of a sheet of paper and every new term you add have a

circle around them. Whenever a chain of associations is exhausted, you start anew at the key term to create another one. You can do this exercise in a specific period of time, say ten minutes. Whenever you can't come up with another term, you draw circles around the term in the center while thinking. But don't think too hard or rationally; try to use the creative part of your brain.

As for the Mind Map, you don't need to limit your time working on it. Although the Mind Map works with similar principles, it demands a more formal approach. Starting with a central term or phrase you create hierarchical chains of associations. Each new term relates to the one before, becoming a sub-category. The farther out you get from the center, the thinner the connecting lines and the more specific the terms or ideas will be. For the Mind Map, thus, you think more about the relationships between ideas, whereas in clustering you don't have to care about that.

For myself, I understand the clustering to be a simple tool to generate new ideas and associations, and the Mind Map a more demanding tool for generating and ordering ideas. I don't use them that often myself, but sometimes they work well for collecting ideas for a paper or chapter. You can also use them for taking notes while reading a text. Depending on the purpose, both clustering and the Mind Map can help you find new ideas. They both allow you to 'storm your brain' when rational and logical thinking don't take you further.



### **The Importance of Writing Early in the Process**

“If you start writing early in your research – before you have all your data, for instance – you can begin cleaning up your thinking sooner.”  
(Becker 2007, pp. 17-18)

It is never too early to begin to write a text. I refer not only to note-taking, writing excerpts of books and articles, transcribing and coding data, and similar prewriting tasks. To write early means to engage your thoughts from the start. People who wait until they have thought through their entire project, or who have found the perfect first sentence and then start to “write it up”, miss a valuable chance. I’ve been one of those people and I know how stressful it is when the deadline approaches and your project is still existing mainly in your head.

Beginning to write early has at least three advantages over waiting too long. First, an early start allows you to use writing as a tool for thinking. While you might be able to think through a short paper, it gets more difficult and complex the longer the text you’re working on is. Instead of trying to keep everything in your head and not losing the control over the order, you can write down what you know at every stage of your project. When you use writing as a thinking tool, you are free to write whatever comes to mind. When you do this, you will not only discover what you think about your topic, but you will also see if your ideas work on paper. A side effect of regularly writing down what you’re thinking about is getting new ideas.

Maybe you think that writing in this way wastes time because it’s not “real” writing. Even if it isn’t, as a second

advantage, it gives you a basis for writing the final text. You don't have to start from scratch because you have material to work with. Maybe you can even use some of your notes and need only revise them.

The third advantage of writing early in the process is that you get used to writing. It allows you to establish a habit of writing regularly. Imagine that you didn't begin to write early and, due to the impending deadline, you need to start writing. If you're not yet used to sitting down every day, this is going to be a rough start. So while you're writing from the beginning of your project, you can establish a regular writing habit at the same time.

No doubt, beginning to write early, before you feel ready – as Boice (2000, chap. 10) suggests – might take courage. Don't worry about whether the things you are writing are the final text or just notes, or whether you can use them or will throw them away. Just write down that which you know, which you don't know, and which you think you should know. Use writing as a tool for thinking and developing your writing skills.

### **Just Write What You Know**

Peter Elbow (1981) called it “freewriting”. Peter Boice (1990) talked about “spontaneous writing” and “generative writing”. Ulrike Scheuermann (2012) talks about “thought sprint”, “focus sprint”, and other writing exercises. Regardless of the different terminology, the exercises allow us to just write what comes to mind. No matter how silly, stylistically bad, or useless a draft, these writing forms demand that we let go of our usual constraints. So, goodbye inner censor, at least for the time

being.

The task is simple: write whatever comes to your mind for five or ten minutes – as freewriting. Or choose a topic and write about that – as generative writing or the focus sprint. In both cases, write without stopping, even if you write, “I don’t know what else to write”. Don’t stop moving your pen or your fingers on the keyboard. You don’t have to rush though, just keep writing. The thoughts will follow. At worst, after five minutes you will have one or two pages of useless text in front of you. At best, you will have used writing to think about something and found out that you know more than you thought – or that you have new ideas that emerged while writing.

But don’t worry: nobody needs to read your text. This is a writing exercise for you alone. Even if you do it in a workshop, where everybody writes for five minutes, you usually don’t have to share the results. But you might want to share your experiences about doing the exercise.

Instead of doing the same standard exercise of simply writing about anything or a specific topic, you can vary it. Scheuermann (2012) presents different forms of this exercise. In each of the exercises, however, you are asked to mark the most important sentences you wrote and a key sentence at the bottom of the page. For one of the variations, “writing relay“, you use the key sentence of the first focus sprint to write another one. And then again, you use the second key sentence to write a third text. Alternatively, you use the same topic for several focus sprint versions. This is a way to explore a topic more deeply.

Now you might wonder, what are these exercises for?

They can be helpful for exploring a topic you don't yet know much about. You write down everything you know – regardless of grammar, punctuation, or sentence fragments. Alternatively, these exercises might help you when you're stuck with a text. If you can't begin or continue writing, take five minutes to write about why you can't begin or continue. The exercise might inspire you or activate your writing mind.

Whatever you write about in these exercises, consider writing to be a tool for thought. Allow yourself to think in written form, instead of trying to keep all your thoughts to yourself until they are in their proper places and perfectly phrased.

### **Choosing a Reading Strategy**

Reading scientific literature is a demanding task, although it can be fun or even exciting. While reading a single text might be manageable, researchers have to deal with a flood of field-specific texts every year. The days are gone when someone could have known all of the relevant literature on any one topic. Therefore, the question is, how can you manage the reading workload without drowning in the attempt? You might want to consider the following steps.

First, if you have stacks of articles and books piling up, you might want to skim them and decide which texts are relevant. In order to determine that, you will need to define criteria of relevance (as you have to do for a literature review anyway). With the criteria in mind, you can skim the following parts of each text in that order: title, abstract, introduction and/or conclusion. As soon as

you find that the criteria do not apply to a text, move on to the next one.

Second, whether you have a stack of texts to read or only one, make sure you formulate a reading goal: Why should I read this text? What do I want to learn from it? Similarly, it helps to formulate what you expect the text to deliver as well as what you already know about the topic. You should also determine how much time you want to spend on the text. With a reading goal, you will be able to fine-tune your reading. It also influences the way you read and process what you've read.

The third step consists of defining how you read: Do you use pen and marker to highlight important words, sentences or passages? Do you write notes in the margin? Do you take notes on a separate paper? What should the notes look like: factual reporting of the content or commentary about what the author says and does? Do you use visualization methods such as clustering or Mind Map to take notes? Depending on the text and the different aspects of your reading goal, you might want to define these aspects more or less deliberately. Especially when it comes to a big stack of articles that you need to read, a systematic approach makes your life easier.

As the fourth and last step, you have to define how you will use the text afterwards. Do you summarize it (again, is it a factual summary or a commentary) or do you try to write directly about it in your own text? Do you compare it to other texts you've read (e.g. for a literature review)? These and other questions become crucial if you want to use texts for your own work, to study for an exam or prepare a presentation.

You don't need to go through all of the steps for each and every text you read. If you read for pleasure, then you don't need a reading goal or method for note-taking. It all depends on what you want to get from and what you intend to do with a particular text. You might get into a routine and stick to similar methods and strategies. Whatever you choose to do, be deliberate and think about how your decisions will help you to deal with your workload for reading and writing.

### **What is Efficiency?**

Academic writers would like to work as efficiently as possible. That's one reason why they participate in my courses. Depending on their idea of efficiency, however, they may leave the course early and disappointed. My ideas of efficiency do not match theirs.

On the one hand, there is the idea that writing should be a streamlined process, comparable to a conveyor belt in a factory. You start with one process, finish it, and go on to the next one, until that one is finished and so on. For some writers, this idea works well in practice. For many others, this idea creates challenges. Their expectations about the writing process do not match how they are able to work. They're disappointed because they don't live up to their own expectations and, they think, to general expectations of efficiency.

My idea of efficiency is rather different from a streamlined process. My idea of efficiency has more to do with knowing how you work best, what your goals and tasks are, and then doing the work you set out to do. Whether this happens in a streamlined process or not

doesn't really matter. As long as you use the available time the way you had planned, you should do fine. Instead of following a process you imagined would be very efficient – because others say so or it is thought to be the ideal model – and not being comfortable with it, you would do better to choose your own.

Find out in which way you can best accomplish a goal within a limited period of time. If your strategies work, stick to them. If they don't work, adapt them.

### **Finding Your Main Thesis**

During the first two years of my PhD I wrote different versions of my disposition, several papers for PhD courses, and a few preliminary pages of my theory and methods chapters. I waited with writing regularly because I didn't yet know my main thesis and the structure with which to present it. Although I worked with my research data on a daily basis, I didn't write about them much. I waited until I knew how to approach them. I mainly thought about my thesis instead of writing about it.

If this problem sounds familiar, you might wonder how to deal with it. I work with PhD candidates who encounter the challenge of finding their thesis and structure. They have all their data and have read everything they need to know about their topic, yet they are stuck with the question "Now what?"

Despite having known what they wanted to do in the beginning of their PhD, it seems that there is too much to do or that it's not original enough. In this situation, I try to help them get started, because the best way to deal with this situation is to write. I suggest that they use writing as

a tool for thinking. Until then, they had mostly thought about their topic or written texts for other purposes such as conferences, courses, or grants. What they face at this point is a bigger picture of presenting their findings. While writing a PhD thesis may sound overwhelming, we should not forget that the thesis consists of many small tasks and elements. The goal is to assemble them in the right sequence. This will make the job less frightening.

Here, I would like to suggest a sequence of tasks that allows PhD candidates to find their main thesis and structure (to a certain extent, it also applies to other researchers and text genres). This approach breaks down the task of finding one's thesis and structure into smaller and more manageable parts. And if the smaller tasks still seem too big to be manageable, we can break them down again into even smaller bits (e.g. portions for each writing session).

In order to find your thesis, you must first know the discussions to which you want to contribute. The literature review allows you to see what has been done so far and what kind of problems and questions are discussed. Whether in a single chapter or distributed throughout your thesis, eventually you have to show that you know the literature connected to your topic and in which way your thesis will contribute to the discussions. That is why a preliminary literature review is a good starting point to learn more about your own perspective. For the time being, however, you can write about the literature for yourself. That means, you can write it in a conversational tone or even as a dialogue, if you like. The goal of this first step is to find out for yourself how you want to connect to



the literature. You don't have to write the perfect draft yet. Consider this step to be an intellectual playground, where you are free to experiment with concepts and perspectives.

The literature review should lead you to find out what your contribution will be. This is why you need to read and write about the literature critically. You have to find a niche or crack in the discussions, something to which your PhD thesis can connect. To contribute to a field of knowledge means to help develop it further, whether with a new concept, perspective, or research findings (or all of the above).

Once you know your contribution, you have to figure out how to phrase it in the form of a thesis. A thesis is a claim that you will present and defend with your discussions and analyses. It is an answer to the questions to which you want to contribute. In my PhD thesis I raised the question of how we can conceptualize the relationship between economy and art as social phenomena. This is a question that authors from several disciplines have answered in different ways. Since I wanted to contribute to the understanding of this relationship, I suggested a new approach and presented it with an analysis of a specific social phenomenon.

As soon as you know your thesis, you have to figure out how to present the findings that support your claim. While you can stick to the tried and true (introduction, theory, methods, results, discussion, conclusion), it will be more interesting for yourself and your readers if you find your own way (if there is not specific structure required, that is). You can ask yourself this question: What kind of story do I

want to tell with my PhD thesis? You need to unfold your argument to make it intelligible. There are many ways to do that. It may help you to tell someone else about your thesis; someone who is not yet familiar with it. The way you explain your work to this person may give you some hints about how to tell your story or not (the sequence of the arguments, the information your readers need etc.). If you know how to tell the story, you can make a draft of the thesis' structure. While you can still modify it, you now have a basis you can work with.

When you know the literature (and thus your audience), your contribution to the literature, your main thesis, and the way to write about it, you can start to write. At best, you already have dozens of pages of notes on the literature, your contribution and thesis, and maybe first drafts of analyses. You can now work with this material and fill in the chapters. If you are stuck in a chapter, as I was several times, think again about what you want to say with it and how it contributes to your overall thesis. While writing you will find out whether your plans will work out or not. You can still change the sequence or even contents of the chapters. However, in the end, each chapter needs to contribute to your thesis. Everything superfluous has to go.

The different tasks do not necessarily follow each other in this linear sequence. You could jump back and forth, as I did. But it may help you to understand the different tasks that are involved in constructing your thesis. Perhaps it will help you to break down the process into smaller and more manageable parts. Remember, nobody writes a thesis from start to finish in one go. One of the main learning

effects of doing a PhD is to learn how to do it. For me, it is more about the process than the product. The earlier you start with this process, the more time you get to experiment with, change, and improve your ideas and prose.

### **Two Books, Two Writing Strategies**

I just finished my second book. The writing process was completely different from that of my first book.

For my first book, I contacted the publisher before I had even written a word. I described my idea, which I had already worked out in my mind. Since the publisher was interested, I filled out a questionnaire and sent it together with the book's table of contents. The publisher was still interested and wanted to see two chapters. I promised two chapters within the next two months. In those two months I had written half of the book, but only sent the publisher the promised chapters. While waiting for the reply, I continued to write. It didn't take the publisher long to offer to publish the book. In the next few weeks I finished the first draft of the book and sent it to two friends for feedback. After getting their feedback, I revised the manuscript several times. The editor responsible for my book gave me feedback as well. After revising the manuscript once again, I sent it to an external editor for editing and proofreading. After another round of revision, I handed in the manuscript. Except for another and final look at the proofs, my part of the production process had been finished. Half a year later the book was published.

Of course, I thought that I would write my next book just as quickly and nearly effortlessly as the first one. That was

not the case.

For my second book, I waited a few months until I knew what it would be about. I didn't have a plan so much as a general idea about the book's goal and some of its chapters. That's why I started out by writing everything I knew about each chapter topic - myths about academic writing - without yet worrying about the book's structure. Writing like this for several weeks, I ended up with fifty pages of the first draft. Because I didn't know what to add and didn't know whether it was any good, I gave the manuscript to a friend for feedback. His feedback showed me that I had not yet discovered the basic issues of the text: Whom was I writing for? What tone and style should I use? What's the main goal of the book?

While having these questions in my mind, the publisher contacted me about a second book - talk about a coincidence. When the publisher asked me, whether I could write a book about one topic or another that they had had in mind, I told them that I already had a book project running. They wanted to know more so I sent them a brief description. Since they were interested in the project, I sent them a table of contents and an exposé some weeks later. While waiting for their answer, I continued to work on the manuscript. It almost doubled in length. I received feedback on the expanded manuscript from another friend. The publisher decided to publish the book, so I sent the manuscript to their editor. After receiving the contract and an external editor's assessment, I finished the text and sent it for proofreading.

The first book developed according to a writing strategy

we could call the planer's strategy. The second book developed according to one that we could call the writing-away strategy. The planer's strategy starts with a clear plan and structure and is followed by writing and revision. The writing-away strategy starts with a vague idea, which is written down as quickly as possible. Having a first draft, the writer revises the text, trying to find its structure. In my case, the second feedback helped me to determine the text's structure. In contrast to the first strategy, writing and revision may alternate more often in this case.

Whatever strategy you might use to write your texts, it's a good idea to choose it deliberately. And whenever you think that the chosen strategy doesn't work out for you, don't hesitate to change it for the better. I don't know what my next book project will look like and what strategy will fit it best. Therefore, it could be entirely different to the two I've used so far.

### **What is the Point of a Research Question?**

Students often struggle to find the right research question. It should have a scope, which allows them to write the kind of paper that is expected and to meet the requirements of length. Depending on their research question, they may fall short of this goal. Either their focus is too wide, so that they write much more than they need to, or they narrow their focus down to one small detail that won't fill half the text's length that is expected. As far as I know, the former happens more often, because it's much more difficult to be short and concise. While there is no guaranteed recipe that solves the problem of finding the right focus for a text, I would like to point to the important functions of a

research question. Thinking about them might help you to deal with the challenge of finding and using your research question.

On the one hand, a research question helps you to deal with the overall research process. It allows you to separate the literature you need from that, which isn't relevant even though it might be interesting. Without this focus, you might end up - as so many students and researchers do - reading everything you find, only to drown in the mass of arguments and insights. The flood of literature doesn't make your writing life easier. If you start with a clear question, you will soon be able to determine what is relevant and what you can leave aside.

While this might sound reasonable, many writers hesitate to choose a research question, because they think they will have to stick with it for the duration of writing their paper. The beauty of research, however, lies in the process: when you start with a question, you might find a more relevant one or have to narrow it down once again. Only with a clear question can you decide during the process whether or not it works. If you discover a better question at the end of the process, which gives you new answers, then you have truly done your research. So be courageous and start with one question, without knowing whether you may need to adapt it.

On the other hand, your research question not only helps you to sort things out, but should also help your readers understand what it is that you want to say. In the end, your research question (or the thesis you propose, for that matter) works as the golden thread in your text. Maybe you know the feeling of reading a text without a

clear research question yourself. It's frustrating to read page after page, being left without a goal or direction. Such texts don't stick in my mind and I usually quit reading them. They were obviously not written for readers. Or to put it differently, the writer didn't do his or her job properly.

In order to not disappoint your readers, you should use your research question as a guide throughout your text. It doesn't need to show up in every other sentence. You need to make sure, however, that your readers understand why they are reading what they are reading and how it relates to your research question (even if it's a sidetrack that you want to introduce). The research question, thus, helps you to construct your text for readers who don't know as much as you do. It helps you to structure your arguments. And while figuring out how to structure your text, you will find out whether you defined your research question concisely enough that you can answer it in the expected number of pages.

Consider the research question as one of your writing tools. Use it both for the research process and for writing the text. In the first case, it should help you to understand something new. In the second case, it should help you to make your insights more understandable for your readers.

### **Peer Feedback – The Writer's Perspective**

Many academic writers – from students to experienced researchers – ask their colleagues and peers to give them feedback on texts. However, not all of them will receive helpful feedback. The major problem, as far as I have heard, lies in an inadequate instruction the writers give

their colleagues. If they just ask for feedback, the chances are good that they won't get what they need. That's not only disappointing for the writers, but also for their colleagues who have wasted precious time by giving unhelpful feedback. The question is, how you can avoid this situation and get quality feedback. You might not be able to completely control how others read your text and respond, but you can try to make the best of it.

Whenever you want feedback on a text, give clear instructions. Don't just give your text away, hoping to receive exactly what you need. That might never happen. You have to decide what your colleague should look at.

First, start your instruction with some context: tell your colleague about the kind of text it is, what the target readers might expect, and at which stage of the writing process you currently are. The last point in particular will influence the next instruction.

Second, tell your colleague what he or she should look at in the text. If it's a first draft of an article, you are not yet interested in grammar, spell check or other small things like that. You might want to know whether the arguments work or whether the structure makes sense. If you are handing over the final version, you might include the small things as well. Whatever instructions you give, decide what kind of information about your text will help you at the current stage of writing. This will also ensure that your colleague won't waste time with things you don't want to hear about. Instead, it will help your colleague to focus and give you the best possible feedback.

When you finally get your feedback, don't justify yourself when facing critical comments. Save your energy



for when you get back to work. It won't help you to tell your colleague face to face why you did what you did or why you can't implement his or her comment. Do it in the text, where you need to convince your future readers.

When you receive feedback from different colleagues, you might get diverging or contradictory comments. Don't think that you need to implement everything. You are the author, so you decide whether and how your text will change. Ultimately, it's you who has to defend the arguments, the structure and so on. Only include things you are convinced of and that you can defend.

If you instruct your colleagues in this way, you will have done your part in the feedback process. You can only hope that they will know how to give proper feedback: feedback that is motivating, critical but helpful, and kind.

### **Peer Feedback – The Reader's Perspective**

Most students and researchers know intuitively how to give good feedback. However, it doesn't hurt to make ones ideas explicit once in a while in order to see whether they can be improved. This is also an opportunity to detect some less favorable habits when giving feedback.

The following questions may help you to find out more about your ideas and habits: Where is your focus when reading the text? How do you phrase your feedback? How does the author of the text normally react to your feedback? Why do you take the time to give feedback? What do you expect when receiving feedback?

As I wrote above, feedback should be motivating, critical but helpful, and kind. The purpose of giving feedback, thus, isn't to bash your colleague, to make him or her

depressed, or to tear apart his or her text. That's not the way anybody likes to get feedback. In order to ensure that your feedback is as motivating and helpful as possible, consider the following suggestions.

First, when given instructions, follow them closely. If your colleague wants to know more about the text's structure, give feedback on the structure. If he or she wants to know whether there are still spelling mistakes, focus on them. Don't look for things you weren't ask to look for. If you must add some comments on things the person didn't instruct you to look for, always ask whether he or she wants to hear them.

Second, give positive as well as critical comments (if possible in this order, maybe ending your feedback with another positive comment). While commenting, you don't have to go into detail and tell the person what you think should be done. It's enough to just point to a passage and say that you don't understand a word, a sentence, the argument, or whatever it is. You can say, "I stumbled on this or that". The person will have to figure out how to revise, so that future readers don't stumble. Or, you can say "Something is missing for me here" or "I think this bit here is redundant". You don't need to start a long soliloquy; it might confuse the person.

Third, phrase your comments in personal terms, as in the examples above. To say, "The text doesn't work like this", "You can't do this", or "This is great" is too general. Your comments are your opinion about the text, even if you think it generally applies. Giving general, impersonal comments might intimidate the author and make him or her anxious. That's why you should always phrase your

comments in a way that shows that they are your personal opinion: “I like your text, because...”; “I don’t think you need paragraph six”; “I missed the reference to...”. You can also say “As a non-expert, I...” if you have a different disciplinary background to the author. Phrases like these make it easier for the author to accept them. If they think that they apply in general and need to be implemented, they might get into trouble.

Fourth, be as specific as possible. For each comment, point to the passage in question (word, sentence, paragraph). Make sure the author knows what you are talking about. This is crucial, especially when there are multiple people giving feedback on one text.

And last, don’t edit if you’re asked to give feedback. Giving feedback and editing are two different things. Only do what you’re asked for. Again, it saves time and energy for both the author and yourself.

### **Editing by Ear**

If a sentence sounds weird, if you stumble over a long word that twists your tongue, or if you almost suffocate before the end of the sentence – then you should revise your prose. To identify these issues, you should read your text aloud. Reading what you wrote aloud is to edit by ear – an obviously neglected tool for improving one’s texts. But authors of books about writing suggest it as a valuable tool for revising (e.g. Becker 2007).

I’ve only begun editing by ear since writing my blog. Before that I never seriously thought about reading aloud. I guess I would have felt silly talking to myself. But I found out that it makes a difference whether I just think about

what I wrote or speak it. While researchers read their texts aloud if it's a conference paper, they might not do so when it's a long PhD thesis or journal article.

The fact that writers don't necessarily like to read aloud became obvious to me when I led workshop participants to read paragraphs they provided themselves. One participant didn't like this part. And although I explained why they should read aloud, he wasn't convinced. Even if it takes longer to read a text this way, or if it's embarrassing, it nonetheless helps to spot text elements that should be edited. The exercise isn't about how well we can read, but how the prose we write sounds.

So, if you gasp for breath, you might want to shorten the sentence or make it into two. If you twist your tongue while pronouncing a long and fancy noun, you might want to look for a shorter and simpler word with the same meaning. And if the sentence doesn't seem to make sense when reading it aloud - if it hurts your ear - consider a more thorough revision.

### **Do You Have a Publication Strategy?**

Many researchers follow a publication strategy. They intend to publish with the most prestigious and highest rated journals in their discipline. Today, every researcher seems to be obliged to at least try publishing with the best. Unfortunately, only a fraction of them will succeed; the others will belong to the 90% or more of those rejected by renowned journals. What can you do, you might wonder, as a PhD candidate or junior researcher?

In general, the advice that applies to every challenge writers face also applies here: ask your colleagues and

peers. What kind of publication strategy do they follow? Do they even have a strategy? What can you learn from their experiences, if you do not have any yourself? Which pitfalls can you avoid with the help of others?

If you still have no idea about possible strategies after talking to your peers, here are two common strategies. They might also work for you, depending on your ambitions.

On the one hand, you can try to publish in the best journals. In this case, you might want to find out, which journals have the highest impact factor and the highest prestige in your research community. If you aim for a publication at this level, make sure you look into the lists of editors and the editorial advisory board. With this strategy, it does not hurt to know what those members have published and, if possible, include them in your article – even if only in the form of name-dropping. True, the advisory board often includes researchers and scholars who would not have the time to even look into the journal. To enter the circle of a journal, however, you might want to consider who may already belong to it and how you can use that for your own paper.

This publication strategy will suit you well, if you plan to go the hard, steep, and long career path of academia. For all those who do not follow this path on the other hand, there is another publication strategy you can choose.

In this publication strategy, the question is not where you should, but where you want to publish. Make a list of five or six journals that would suit your paper. They do not need to be the prestigious journals with the highest rejection rates. It might be a regional or national journal or

a new one that publishes only on a specific topic in your research field. The first journal on the list would be the place you would like to publish your paper. The second journal would be the second choice etc.

Now write your paper for the first journal, send it in, and find out what happens. If you get rejected and receive advice for improving the paper, take it as an opportunity. Either you re-submit the paper or you adapt it to the second journal on your list. Go through that process until either your paper is accepted or you are through with your list. In the latter case, as a PhD candidate told me, you might want to start with the first paper again. After working through the paper several times and improving it with the help of different feedback, you should try the top journal on your list again. Maybe this time your paper will live up to the editors' expectations.

Whether you choose the first or second strategy – or even a different one – depends on your opinion about publishing, your career, or the time that you can invest in the process. You might also disagree with what I just wrote. The point I want to make, however, is this: choose your publication strategy deliberately. You should not stumble around and do what everyone else does. Know your writing and publishing strategies.

### ***Update***

After reading Paul J. Silvia's book *Write It Up* (2015), I suggest that you look into the book and find out more about publication strategies. There you will find why the strategy presented above might not work for everybody. Silvia argues that you don't have the time to go through

your journal list, changing your manuscript several times, while waiting for some journal to publish it. He suggests that you pick your preferred journal and choose one or two others for backup. But see for yourself – the book is a worth-while read.

### **Being a Professional Scholarly Writer**

When we write, we come across many challenges, both small and large. We continually need to make decisions and thereby solve problems: What is the audience of this text and how do we address it? What is the function of the text genre? What conventions do we have to follow? How should we formulate a thesis or question? How do we plan the writing process? And should we use this particular word or another? These and other questions emerge while writing and we try to answer them as best we can. However, we rarely deal with them on a conscious level. Now, you might wonder, what does this have to do with professional writers?

Contrary to what we might think, professional writers face the same questions and problems that everybody else does. Questions and problems are an inevitable part of the writing process. Professional writers, however, know about the challenges that emerge during the different stages of the process. They know how to deal with them. Their knowledge doesn't mean that they won't struggle at times when solving problems (see Keyes 2003a, 2003b). Instead of despairing and quitting, professional writers have the tools to overcome obstacles and find an appropriate solution. They've honed their craft and are able to deal with the challenges that writing poses.

If professional writers are aware of their own skills they are more likely to be aware of the skills of other writers (such as students). Professional writers, then, can help others to understand the questions and challenges of the writing process. They provide an understanding of the craft and help others to become professional writers in their own right.

Professional scholarly writers, or any other kind of writer, aren't the ones without problems; they are the ones who master them.



## **Part Three: Challenges of Academic Prose**

### **Teaching and Learning the Basic Tools of Academic Prose**

Recently, I held a writing workshop with university students. We talked about how and why one uses academic language. I have ceased being surprised when I hear about what supervisors and teachers are saying. For example, the students are not allowed to use “I” in an academic paper nor are they meant to include their own opinions in an essay. There is certainly nothing wrong with setting some rules for writing assignments. That is something that researchers usually discover when they want to publish a research article. The teachers and supervisors forget, however, to give the students sufficient reasons why this is so; forget to tell them that this might only apply for this specific assignment; and forget to tell them how they can write in order to stick to those rules. They don’t teach them the basic language tools, which no researcher writing academic prose can do without.

In the case of not using “I”, we have a variety of ways to write about a topic while still bringing our opinion or perspective to the text. We can do it as if the study or research is responsible (“This study argues that...”) or create an even greater distance with other means (“As will be shown...”, “It can be postulated...”). The latter usually appears with passive sentences that create their own

stylistic challenges.

There is, however, also the possibility to talk about other texts and sources while at the same time saying what we think about them. After all, what will interest our readers is not simply whom we read, but also what we think of their research and how our research relates to them (the niche we want to occupy). This is where reporting verbs, hedges and boosters, and other rhetoric formulas come into play: “Miller discusses X, while Barns asks why...”; “According to Bourdieu...”; “Jones correctly suggests the thesis that...”; “Contrary to the position put forth by Adams, this study suggests that...” and so on (see Graff and Birkenstein 2006). This is how we discuss the work of others, while identifying their position as well as ours – even without the need to write “I”. In this way, we engage in controversies and debates in our field of research, instead of just listing research results without any comment.

I suppose that many university teachers and supervisors assume that the students will learn these basic tools by themselves. I learned it that way as well. While this may happen incidentally by imitating what we read, there is still much that can go wrong: when students don’t truly understand what they are imitating and when and how they should use it. If teachers and supervisors told their students how and why they should write in a certain way, they would learn to write more deliberately. They would use these tools of academic language more strategically for the purpose of communicating questions, arguments, or results. Then, they would also better understand the many corrections and (if they’re lucky) comments in their graded assignments and could learn from them.

To the teachers and supervisors reading this: If you don't know how exactly the academic language works yourself, even if you use it correctly and have for a long time, please get someone else to explain it to your students before they start their assignment (e.g. a writing coach). You will do yourself a big favor (the papers will turn out much better) and you will allow your students to learn the basic tools they need to write academic prose. Those students who decide to pursue a PhD will thank you, because then they will be able to focus on more important things such as getting funding, doing research, and learning to be a researcher who has something to contribute.

### **What Does it Mean to Write Academic Texts?**

Opinions differ when it comes to the question presented in the title. For some, a text has to cite other authors in order to make it academic. For others, it needs to be factual – that is, without personal statements. For still others, a text has to sound complicated and full of jargon. We might find yet more views. None of them are completely wrong, but each only highlights one aspect of a bigger picture.

A text becomes academic, when it fulfills (a minimum of) the following conditions:

- The text connects to other texts and contributes new insights to a discussion. The contribution may be intended for a special disciplinary community or a wider audience of scholars. In any case, the addressed community decides whether the text contributes to a discussion and, therefore, forms part of an academic conversation.

- To contribute, authors need to draw on the insights of other scholars by referring to them in paraphrases, quotes, and citations. The authors should evaluate knowledge to see where and how they can contribute new insights. When they publish a text, other authors may critically reevaluate the research to provide new insights themselves.
- The text presents the knowledge and insights in a factual way, leaving out personal opinions and views. Authors justify their questions, theses, and arguments; they define concepts and explain methods. Their readers should be able to understand and replicate the research.
- The authors use language that is as clear and as simple as possible. Using complicated sentences and jargon for its own sake goes against the goal of academic texts: to communicate insights (see the various style guides and manuals). Scholars can still use technical terms and elaborate concepts, but they should use them deliberately and precisely. This aspect refers again to the second point above: other scholars should be able to understand and evaluate a text. If they cannot understand an argument because of imprecise or cluttered language, it is the authors' fault, not the readers'.

If a text fulfills these conditions, an academic conversation can continue. Depending on the academic community, one or another of these aspects (or further ones) may prove to be more important.

If your texts fulfill these conditions, you should be on the safe side. Depending on the context and its academic requirements, you must adapt. As with everything else when writing, make deliberate decisions that you can justify – whether they diverge from demands and conventions or stick to them.

### **Lessons from C. Wright Mills**

We write to be read and, in the best case, to be cited. That's why we should care about our prose. In my opinion – and I'm not the only one – scholars should write as clearly and concisely as possible, even if they describe complex facts. Using complicated prose won't help their readers understand.

The sociologist C. Wright Mills already advocated for such an approach to scholarly writing decades ago. Thanks to Howard S. Becker's book *Writing for Social Scientists* (2007), I learned about Mills' book *The Sociological Imagination* (1961). In the appendix of his book, Mills writes about “intellectual craftsmanship” in the social sciences, an issue still relevant today.

Mills observed, “a turgid and polysyllabic prose does seem to prevail in the social sciences” (1961, p. 217). In contrast to the state of academic prose, he was certain that his readers also favored “clear and simple language” (ibid.). This mismatch still persists, as Helen Sword shows in her well-researched book *Stylish Academic Writing* (2012). Mills argues that the “lack of ready intelligibility” does not correlate with the “complexity of subject matter” or the “profundity of thought” (1961, p. 218). So, whether we write about a mundane fact such as two people greeting

each other or more complex issues, there's no reason to use difficult language to describe either of them.

According to Mills, unintelligible prose has to do with a "[d]esire for status" (1961, p. 218). However, there's a "vicious circle" (1961, p. 219) at work here: scholars' unintelligibility "is one reason why they do not have the status they desire" (1961, pp. 218-219) - this doesn't apply to some of the most famous social scientists, though. Mills suggests a simple solution to break out of this circle: get rid of the desire for status, "the academic *pose*", and you will produce intelligible prose (1961, p. 219, emphasis in original). One of the problems lies in the socialization process that students go through. Students learn to imitate the academic prose by reading and will eventually reproduce it in their own writing - yet another vicious circle (Becker 2007: 41).

So, how does Mills suggest that we deal with this situation? He encourages us to ask three simple questions: "(1) How difficult and complex after all is my subject? [sic] (2) When I write, what status am I claiming for myself? (3) For whom am I trying to write?" (1961, p. 219). By asking these questions, we should be honest to ourselves about what we try to accomplish with our work. Do we strive for social status or a contribution to a field of knowledge? I personally opt for the latter. Trying to write clear prose doesn't necessarily mean excluding technical terms. Mills emphasizes that their use doesn't mean difficult prose. Rather, they should be "clear and precise" (ibid.). Our prose should serve its purpose - the communication of insights into a field of knowledge to a specific audience. Depending on our audience, we no doubt have to adapt

our prose. For highly specialized scholars, we may use more technical terms and concepts than we do for a grant committee of non-specialists. But in either case, there is no point in making our prose more difficult than necessary. Reader orientation constitutes one of the main writing competencies, which allows us to make ourselves understood. Thus we should never forget for whom we're writing and why.

At the end of the text, Mills asks us to be good craftspeople, who know how to write simple and clear academic prose. For me, it boils down to the following: don't try to prove your intelligence by writing difficult texts. Know your audience and write intelligibly.

**“If you find that writing is hard, it's because it is hard.” – A Goodbye to William Zinsser**

The quote in the title is among my most loved statements from William Zinsser (2006, p. 9). The statement not only captures how writing is, but it also soothes us: “don't worry,” it seems to say, “it's not your fault; it's simply the nature of writing”. That's one truth about writing that I like to pass on to my clients.

After a long life of writing and editing, William Zinsser recently died at age 92. But his book *On Writing Well* (2006) will continue to influence writers. As it says on the cover of the 2006 edition, it's “The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction”. The lessons we learn from Zinsser can and should be applied to academic writing as well (he refers to academic writers a few times).

Zinsser asks us to show our passion for the topics we write about. That's what interested him the most, even if

he didn't care about the topic at all (you know what he means when reading the excerpt from E. B. White's "The Hen (An Appreciation)" from 1944; Zinsser 2006, pp. 26-27). Zinsser asks that writers, including academic ones, show themselves and their passion in the text.

"Simplify, simplify", is another lesson from Zinsser (2006, p. 16). Simplifying is hard work, though. With the reminder to "simplify", Zinsser means to get rid of the clutter that burdens our prose. He wasn't against writing beautiful sentences or using words with special meanings. However, he asks us to decide whether or not we need a word, phrase or sentence and whether we can simplify what we have written. We have to master the basic craft of writing, before we dare to adorn our prose. This applies to academic writers too. Simplifying might not only help you to show your passion for your topic, but also to convey the information clearly.

There are many other lessons in Zinsser's books. If you want to improve your writing, see for yourself. But don't despair if it doesn't work immediately. I still need to learn a lot myself. But what better way to write well than to write and rewrite a lot?



## **Part Four: Dealing with Academic Genres**

### **Between Convention and Creativity**

Scholars can't just publish anything they want anyway they want. There are certain constraints on how they might publish what they have found in their research. As in all other writing contexts, scholars have to deal with a variety of text genres. During their studies, they deal with different genres to those they will deal with later as professional researchers. Genres in one discipline differ from genres in another. Even within one discipline journals have different ideas about what a research article should look like. Instead of going into detail and explaining genre theories, I want to discuss the basic issues that I try to convey to my clients.

As a scholar and writer, you should know about the existence of academic genres (research article, conference paper, PhD dissertation, grant proposal, book review and so on). They all have specific purposes, audiences, media for publication, textual components, and other dimensions to consider. While you don't have to be an expert in every genre, you should be aware of their existence and their basic differences. You can't write a book review as if it was a research article, nor can you write a grant proposal as if it were a dissertation. By reading a lot of texts during your studies, you will be certain to have some knowledge about

the main differences, even if you are not able to list them in each case. Difficulties arise, however, when you have to write a text and don't know how it should look. Knowing about genre conventions and the things you should not do is a crucial part of writing and publishing as a scholar. This takes time and practice, just as everything else you want to master.

Conventions tell us about different aspects of a genre: language and style, text components and their order, citation rules, purpose of the text, and more. They set limits for what we can write and how. Many journals, for example, have clear guidelines on how an article should be written in order to be published. If we neglect them, our articles will be rejected. So, genre conventions stabilize written communication and create specific expectations – as in the case of a recipe, a financial report, or any other text genre.

That said, we shouldn't forget about the other side of conventions: creativity. When you blindly follow conventions, you might also get into trouble. A text always has a specific context in which it is written and published. You can strictly follow every convention you know for PhD dissertations and still fail. If you don't adapt to the context and consider the medium of publication, the audience you're writing for, or the purpose the text should serve, things might go wrong.

The challenge thus lies in the negotiation between conventions and creativity. You should definitely be aware of, or explicitly know about, genre conventions. But you should also know about the possibilities of breaking or playing with them. Whatever you do, however, you should

do it deliberately. Be sure that you know what decisions to make and why. You are the one that might need to defend them.

### **Questions for New Text Genres**

Writers can run into problems, when they use their usual strategies to deal with new text genres. If you're used to writing in the form of the five-paragraph essay and apply the same approach when it comes to a research article, you will be in trouble. If you were to approach your PhD thesis the same way as you did your, let's say, bachelor's thesis, you will be in trouble too - big trouble. Now maybe you think that these are extreme and unlikely examples. If so, please read Keith Hjortshoj's *Understanding Writing Blocks* (2001). He shows how common they are, not only with inexperienced writers.

Every new text genre, as well as every new writing project, requires that you evaluate what you need to do. For a new genre, you might need to invest more time than you would for a new project in a familiar genre. However, you shouldn't take it for granted that all your knowledge and strategies will work equally well for the new task.

When you face a new genre, you should figure out what you need in order to succeed with that particular task. Here are some questions I ask myself every time and that I discuss in my writing workshops. I will not, however, give too much of an answer. You should have an open mind instead of well-intentioned answers that might not be true for you.

1) *What is the purpose of the text and the genre? Why are you writing it?*

In general, of course, the purpose of a text is to communicate something to somebody. The question, however, is what this specific text in this specific genre is meant to communicate. If, for example, the reason you want to write the text clashes with the purpose of the genre, then you have got a problem.

2) *Whom do you write for? Who is your audience?*

Each time you write, you need to know more or less who will be reading your text. Even if you don't or can't know exactly, who your readers are, try to imagine your audience. For this ebook, for example, I imagine that my audience consists mostly of students, PhD candidates and researchers interested in reflections about academic writing. I don't write for children nor do I write for people who never write. To know your audience is crucial, because it affects the answers to the other questions and many of the decisions you need to make while writing.

3) *What expectations and requirements are associated with the genre? What do you need to do, what shouldn't you do, and where can you play with the genre?*

Find out about expectations and requirements (language, style, text structure, length, layout, formatting, citation style etc.). Do this before writing the first word. You don't want to have a final draft and then have to change it for the next few days or weeks to make it fit the requirements retroactively. Sometimes these expectations and requirements are clearly stated on websites (e.g. journal articles). In some cases you have to discover or decide more yourself (e.g. often with conference abstracts). You

should make good use of your colleagues, who already have experience with the genre, journal or conference. You can also ask the persons in charge of the publication (journal editors, publishers, conference organizers). Don't assume that there are no requirements just because none are stated. Find out what you should do and what you would better off not doing.

These are the very basics of dealing with a new genre or text. Knowing the answers, however, might make your writing life easier and get you through the review process much more smoothly. Writers who don't care about these things are likely to be rejected out of hand. If you care, do your job properly and do your research about the genres and texts you write.

### **Conference Abstract**

Recently, I counseled two clients who were working on conference abstracts. Although I have written a few abstracts in my time as a PhD student, I looked at this academic genre with fresh eyes. To understand a genre, we do not simply have to understand the formal requirements. Rather, we need to understand the purpose of a text and what it is meant to accomplish. Depending on the context, an abstract has specific purposes, which need to be considered. Here I want to talk about a conference abstract. Similar considerations apply to abstracts for journals and other publication forms.

First, you might get a list of requirements regarding length, content, terminology, and other aspects of the abstract. You will do well to implement them, or risk a rejection for not following the rules.

The length of the text is one of the more challenging requirements. Usually an abstract's length ranges from 250 to 500 words. Since you don't have much space to fill, you must make every word count. There should be no word that doesn't contribute to what you want to say. If they are not required, delete all literature references and get rid of qualifying words (adjectives, adverbs) that only produce vagueness. Write as clearly and informatively as possible. Use the available words deliberately.

Now we come to the structure of an abstract. For a conference, you want the readers and potential attendees of your presentation to know the basic information. Of course, your paper's title should already tell everything in short form. In the abstract, however, you can introduce arguments for why someone should be interested in your paper.

You should start by giving an overview of your topic. One to three sentences do the job. After giving some context, you tell the reader to which field of research you want to contribute and why. With this information you will show the research's relevance and that you are connecting your work to a discussion. Next, you will tell the reader why you are contributing to this research, namely that there is something missing or not yet understood. You are going to fill a gap in that discussion. This part doesn't need many sentences. Keep it short and concise. Then you will present your project, which fills that gap. Here you can include information about the structure of your presentation and the material you're working with. But don't get carried away; remember the limited amount of words left. Next introduce your main point, argument, or

thesis. Keep that short and precise as well. Ultimately, try to find a good closing sentence. You may, for example, go back to the overall topic presented at the beginning. Whatever you do, you should give your abstract a clear ending (for more detailed information about the structure of different abstracts see Swales and Feak 2009).

If you include these few elements in your abstract, it will embody the most important information you want to communicate. Besides this, it might be good if you refer to the conference or panel title or the overall topic. Make the connection clear by using key concepts or phrases.

Whether you follow these suggestions or not is up to you. But make sure that you know what you want to do and take deliberate decisions about the different aspects of the abstract. Abstracts promote your paper so that you can participate in a conference. It constitutes your entry ticket. So take your time, even if the short text doesn't look like much work. On the contrary, I think that the shorter the text, the more you have to think about what to exclude and how to write what should be included. Working on the abstract, you might sharpen your perspective on the topic and your argument. This, then, helps you to work out your presentation - yet another genre that needs trimming.

### **Writing as a Game**

When I talk to workshop participants about writing a conference abstract, a few of them usually get confused. They ask, how they could possibly write an abstract about research they haven't yet done. The conference might not take place for another year, but the abstract is due next

month. How can you write about your research, if you don't yet know the results that you will want to present at the conference?

You have to play the game everyone else is playing. In order to be accepted by the conference committee, you have to write the abstract "as if" you've already finished the research. This is called a "promissory abstract" (Swales and Feak 2009, p. 55). The abstract should not, however, disclose that you haven't yet done the research or that you don't yet know the results of the analysis at the time of writing. Instead, you should present your research as confidently and authoritatively as possible. That's what the committee wants to read (aside from innovative, relevant and focused research). They don't want to read that you might find this or that or what you don't yet know but certainly will, after spending a year doing the research that is not yet properly funded... No, if you want to participate in the conference with your own paper, you need to convince them with a strong abstract.

It doesn't matter whether you finally present exactly what you had promised. At every conference I visited, some participants changed their paper titles or even the entire content. Of course, you shouldn't boast or lie in the abstract, knowing that you won't be able to deliver. Don't promise a revolution, in case you simply add a small piece to the puzzle everyone else is working on in your research community. But be self-confident and show in your abstract what you're able to contribute. The abstract should "sell" your paper to the conference committee.

If you play the game, you will be doing what everyone else does. Do it professionally and seriously. Nobody will



notice, because they play it too.

## **Part Five: How Famous Researchers Work**

Learning about other people's writing habits can inspire us and trigger reflections on our own habits. However, it is easier to find examples and anecdotes about literary writers than researchers (see Keyes 2003a, 2003b; Currey 2013). That doesn't mean that academic writers can't learn from the former as well.

I wanted to gather information about those writers who are famous for their research and theories. I wondered how the people I used to read during my studies had worked. What were their thoughts on writing and reading? So I started to read interviews and (auto)biographies of researchers and thinkers. Below are the results (find other examples in Olson and Worsham 2003).

### **Max Weber**

Max Weber (1864-1920), originally a legal scholar, became one of the founding fathers of sociology. Today, students around the world must struggle through his texts if they are to understand his definitions of social action or the influence of protestant ethics on capitalism. But what many may not know is that Weber only published his dissertation, habilitation (postdoctoral qualification) and few articles in his lifetime. All the other collected works and books we read today, were edited and published by his wife Marianne, after Weber died. But where did all

these works come from? In order to understand that, we need to look at how Weber worked.

Weber wrote copiously and consistently. Besides the many letters he wrote – often several a day – he constantly took notes on everything, especially while reading. He took his notes on the back pages of old galleys that he had received from the publisher (large sheets of paper). After his death, his wife discovered stacks of galleys filled with entire manuscripts. Today, it's not possible to decipher all of his notes because he used abbreviations of his own creation.

His notes on what he had read did not reflect the careful nature we would expect from a researcher. While paraphrasing or even quoting someone else's work, he didn't always note the sources properly. However, at that time, researchers knew the same books and knew when an author was referring to someone else's ideas without quoting them. But even for his contemporaries, Weber didn't work as carefully as he should have. Ironically, he criticized others for not working carefully enough.

Weber wrote in longhand. After the turn of the century, he dictated his texts to someone. After receiving the galleys, he revised them, thereby annoying his publisher. He also revised the next round of galleys, which annoyed his publisher even more, to the extent that Weber had to pay for the extra costs. Weber's problem was that he had trouble finishing his texts. There always was something to fix or change. His perfectionism, however, cost him money and his publisher a lot of stress. Due to the many revisions, his texts became more complicated than most sociology students might have wished for.

Weber was a relentless writer, whether writing letters, notes or manuscripts. Except for one article, which he himself called the “sigh”-article – he had trouble finding what he wanted to say – he didn’t seem to have writing problems. Being a hypochondriac, however, meant that during phases of illness he wasn’t able to do anything, not even write. Despite these phases, his perfectionism and the lack of recognition during his lifetime, he kept on writing. Today, thanks to his wife, he is one of the pioneers in the social sciences.

*(Source: I had the chance to talk to Prof. em. Dr. Dirk Kaesler, who wrote several books on Weber’s work and life.)*

### **Niels Bohr**

The Danish physicist Niels Bohr (1885-1962) was one of the pioneers of nuclear physics, winning the Nobel Prize in 1922. At his research institute in Copenhagen, he gathered a community of international physicists.

Bohr availed himself of his colleagues to develop his ideas and theories. He talked to them about problems for hours or even days; his discussion partners took notes. While talking, he could spend a long time on a single statement, refining it more and more. He never seemed to be satisfied with his thoughts, which led to more discussion and more refinement. His texts suffered from this process, because they became complicated and laborious. Biophysicist Max Delbrück, a colleague of Bohr, seems to have said that Bohr’s texts were a “crime for the readers”.

After talking to his colleagues, Bohr used to dictate his texts to his wife Margrethe. It is likely that while taking the dictation his wife revised the text. Bohr seemed to have accepted her revisions, without revising the text again himself. In contrast, however, he did not accept suggested revisions from other physicists, such as Ernest Rutherford.

In one case, when presenting a paper, Bohr apologized for his convoluted prose. He hadn't been trying to present facts, he told his audience, but intended to pose questions, which could be pondered further. Despite this apology, the audience likely still had a hard time understanding Bohr.

*(Source: Fischer 2012)*

### **Norbert Elias**

Not many researchers talk about their writing problems, but sociologist Norbert Elias (1897-1990) wasn't ashamed to do just that. He shared what he learned by looking at his writing, though he struggled with it his entire career.

His writing problems began when he was doing his PhD. He had faith in his mental capabilities and the many ideas he had come up with. Keeping the focus on his work, however, was difficult for him. Nobody told him what he later would discover: many researchers struggle with writing. He thought that he was the only one facing these writing challenges. In this sense, Elias was a normal writer without knowing it. Despite his troubles, back then and throughout his life he never gave up. While facing difficulties, his stamina to write allowed him to become one of the most famous sociologists. In order to deal with his slow writing pace and low productivity, however, he did

Freudian psychoanalysis for several years.

Though he had had difficulty writing, he still succeeded in writing his two-volume masterpiece, *The Civilizing Process*, in only three years (talk about productivity!). Elias said that he did nothing but work on the book, sitting in the British Museum. He added later in an interview that work was the most meaningful thing for him. Even though the learning process was hard and work was still a struggle – he often wrote pieces up to eight times – work was the center of his life. Of course, he had wished that work could have been easier for him, but he knew that it was worth the effort. He knew that his struggles would pay off in a good text that he could be happy with.

(*Source*: Elias 2005a, 2005b)

### **Karl Popper**

The philosopher Sir Karl Raimund Popper (1902-1994) represents well-known positions in epistemology, philosophy of science and the social sciences. But how did a scholar such as Popper write and under which circumstances did he produce the texts that started some of the most famous debates in science?

Popper seemed to have shared a trait with many other professional writers: persistence. From 1938 to 1943, for example, Popper wrote *The Open Society and its Enemies*, revising his manuscript by hand 22 times, while his wife typed it out five times – persistence at its best.

Working on a text for a long time and revising it again and again is an example of how Popper worked on his ideas. He refined and developed them through rewriting.

We could say that he wrote in order to learn more about his ideas and to dig deeper into the subject.

Maybe his thorough work was what led Popper to be a famous defender of clear and comprehensible academic prose. He detested those who needed to make things more complex and complicated than they were in order to impress. His advice: Those who can't write clearly should return to their desk and try again until they succeed - or simply remain silent. He addressed philosophers and sociologists in particular. To make his point, he even dared to translate Habermas' prose into clear language.

Although everyday life back then must have been less distracting than it is today, Popper nevertheless had to shield himself from possible distractions. He didn't like big city life with all its diversions. Instead, he lived (for some time) in the country in Britain and dedicated much of his time to thinking and writing. There was no television or daily newspaper to distract him. He deliberately sought the best environment in which to write. That's dedication.

*(Source: Popper 2000, chap. 6; Geier 1994)*

### **B. F. Skinner**

If a role model for working morale and writing habits were to exist, it would be the behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner (1904-1990). What he did with rats and pigeons in his experiments, he seemed to have done to himself: he trained himself to write regularly by organizing his day and work environment as practically as possible. While I admire his work habits, the way he organized things nevertheless can seem odd at times.

Skinner slept and worked in the same room of his basement. One side of the room contained Skinner's writing desk; the other was a cubicle where he slept (in his day, it must have looked quite futuristic). For several decades, Skinner would wake every morning to an alarm that rang at 5 a.m. He then worked until another alarm rang two hours later (one connected to his desk light). That was the place where he wrote most of his books and articles. Later in his life, Skinner would wake up between 6 and 6.30 a.m., and would start work at around 7 a.m. After finishing his writing, he would go to the office. In the afternoon - in later years at least - he would work in the garden, take a swim, or meet with friends. Some days he would do some work again after dinner. He always went to bed around 10 p.m., but would wake for one hour at midnight, during which he took notes on a clipboard. He obviously enjoyed waking up for a short burst of work. As Skinner's biographer says, he worked no more than five hours a day, including office work. Though he never wrote for more than about three hours a day, he did so every day, even during holidays.

Skinner monitored his productivity by means of the timer. He had some kind of diagram, which he plotted every twelve hours. He also counted the number of words he wrote. This diagram and his work routine were all to aid in reinforcement. The rest of his non-working hours were meant to support his work.

Regarding his writing strategy, however, there is not much information: He seemed to have drafted a text first by hand, then revise it several times (including his books). But because he wrote every day, he nevertheless



accomplished a lot in good time.

There's hardly anybody else with such a strict routine. I know that I couldn't do it for the simple fact that I would get into trouble with my family and friends. For Skinner, this didn't seem to be a problem. Maybe his behavior influenced and reinforced his family and friends' behavior as well.

(*Source*: Bjork 1997)

### **Rachel Carson**

Although she had wanted to become a literary writer as a child, Rachel Carson (1907-1964) changed her major during college from English to Biology. She would later become one of the most famous science writers.

When writing, Carson seemed to have been her own biggest hindrance. She did her research as carefully as possible. Her working pace was slow because she revised her texts again and again - even after having given it to the publisher. Among other reasons, she worked so diligently, because her audience was laypersons from a general reading audience. She tried to convey the information in an understandable way, without simplifying it too much.

While occupied with office work, she found the time and space to write a new book. But this freedom turned into a prison, according to one of her biographers. Having no other obligations besides writing, she couldn't use the time as planned. Reality didn't match her expectations.

Writing *Silent Spring* took Carson four years (published in 1962). On the one hand, she continued to work slowly. On

the other, her work was interrupted by different diseases, among them cancer. Yet, she still worked on and tried to convey the effects of pesticides on the environment for a broader readership.

As if her different struggles weren't enough, Carson was repeatedly confronted with sexist reactions to her books. Some male readers didn't believe that Carson, as a woman, was capable of writing about complex scientific topics. Nor did they believe that her master's degree in zoology would suffice. Despite these reactions, Carson continued to write about science for a broad audience, receiving several prestigious awards.

(*Source*: Steiner 2014)

### **Claude Lévi-Strauss**

Although he wasn't the typical anthropologist, doing years of fieldwork, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) belongs to the most well known thinkers of his field. He became widely known with the publication of his memoir *Tristes Tropiques* in the 1950s and his name became synonymous with the structural method applied to kinship and myths.

He wrote his PhD in New York during the Second World War. Each morning, he went to the New York Public Library to read all he could about anthropology. He would leave at lunch time, eat and go home to write. As a cultural attaché after the war, he spent the mornings in the office and the afternoons at home writing. With this schedule, he managed to finish his thesis. It helped, that his office was in the same building as his apartment.

Years later, back in France, he used a different writing

schedule in order to work on his four-volume *Mythologica*. Between 1964 and 1971, Lévi-Strauss rose between five and six in the morning and worked the entire day. He didn't rest on weekends or take holidays. He worked that hard in order to not lose touch with the hundreds of myths he analyzed. A team of researchers provided the myths, read and proofread his drafts and transcribed his lectures. Even his wife helped with the work.

Working on his memoir, as well as with the myth project later, Lévi-Strauss had a fast writing pace. In the former case, he wrote the book in a few months, simply writing down whatever came to mind. The first edition, however, gave evidence of that, because there were many misspelled words. In the case of the myth project, Lévi-Strauss wrote several hundred pages a year, because he wanted to be done with the books before his death. While writing, Lévi-Strauss listened to classical music. He said that listening helped him think.

You might think that someone like Lévi-Strauss must have loved writing. Otherwise, how could he have spent years of non-stop work on thick volumes? Didier Eribon, who interviewed him, asked, whether he felt joy and satisfaction when finishing a book. Lévi-Strauss answered that he felt satisfaction, but that he didn't associate writing with joy. Instead, it was connected to anxiety and revulsion. He was no stranger to having the empty page in front of him: he needed several days in order to find the first sentence. Even when he had felt satisfied, a finished book became a foreign, dead object to him. There was only one case when Lévi-Strauss enjoyed writing a book, namely the small myth-volume *The Jealous Potter*. In general,

he didn't consider working more fun than not working. However, time seemed to pass without him noticing.

Lévi-Strauss' writing strategy differs from those of other famous researchers. Having used the strategy during his time in New York, Lévi-Strauss used his lectures at the Collège de France to test his ideas. After giving a lecture based on an outline, he would transform the material and insights into a text.

Lévi-Strauss admitted to having been more of a desk than a fieldwork anthropologist. But because of his broad interest in ethnographic material from all around the world and his perseverance while sifting through hundreds of myths, he contributed some of the most influential and controversial insights to twentieth century social science.

*(Source: Lévi-Strauss and Eribon 1991; Wilcken 2010)*

### **Roland Barthes**

The French literary theorist, philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes (1915-1980) not only wrote about writing, he also deliberately organized his own writing environment and habits. In an interview, when asked whether he had a working method, he pointed to the fact that talking about working methods is taboo. The taboo, however, might indicate how important working methods are. Luckily, Barthes then explained his own writing habits.

Barthes wrote both longhand and on typewriter. First, he would write by hand, following a visual impulse or similar. Writing by hand provided him with a work ceremony: he liked to change pens during writing. Afterwards, when preparing the text for readers, he would type it on a

typewriter. He conceded, however, that he could only type with two fingers, but started to practice typing on an electronic machine every day. While this two-step process was sacred to him, the new tool changed his ritual.

Similar to the process, he maintained an organized work space as well. Whether at home or in his country house, he divided the space into three areas: work, music and painting areas. The work space itself was divided by different wooden tables for different functions: current work, notes and plans, the typewriter, and an index-card system.

Like many other writers, Barthes had his regular working hours – 9.30 a.m. until 1 p.m. – which worked better for him than simply working whenever he felt like it.

Barthes seems to have been well organized and structured. However obsessive he was, his work and writing habits were thought through and seemed to have worked well for him.

*(Source: de Rambures and Barthes 1985)*

### **Richard Feynman**

Richard Feynman (1918-1988) wasn't only famous for his contributions to physics, including his work on the first atomic bomb for the Manhattan project. He was also famous for his character. When you read the book "Surely you're joking, Mr. Feynman!" you gain an insight into this unusual physicist's life.

When it came to his work habits, he had his own idea about what was possible and helpful. While many researchers yearn for a sabbatical, Feynman didn't want to

spend his entire time thinking about his research. He needed distraction in order to find new research ideas. He pitied the thinkers and researchers at the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton (e.g. Einstein), because they had nothing to do but research. What if they didn't have any ideas while sitting there, Feynman wondered. For him, this situation must have been associated with feelings of guilt and depression. The researcher would be chased by sorrows. In contrast, Feynman needed distraction through teaching, because students asked questions that could initiate new ideas.

Feynman seemed to be able to work anywhere. In one case, he went to teach a course at a different university. During the train trip from Los Alamos to Ithaca, which took several hours, he worked on reports for the Manhattan project and prepared for the course he would be teaching. In another case, Feynman spent ten months in Brazil. Besides working at the office and playing in a Samba band, he worked on theory in his hotel room.

Even someone like Feynman could become exhausted and therefore unable to do any more research. When he was confronted with different job offers, he didn't feel that he could meet the employers' expectations. Eventually, however, he realized how he could get out of this situation: High expectations were the problems of employers, not his. That's what helped him to relax. Although he still thought that he couldn't do research, he found a new research project in a cafeteria by chance. Once again, he enjoyed researching.

Feynman knew how and in which situations he worked best. Even when he was blocked for some time, he found a

way out by himself, beginning with his own thoughts and expectations.

(*Source*: Feynman 1985)

### **Clifford Geertz**

Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) represents one of those scholars, who know exactly what they are doing and why they are doing it while writing. At least that's the impression he gave when giving an interview to Gary A. Olson.

Geertz considered himself to be a writer. As an anthropologist, however, he spent many years in the field. While doing fieldwork, he only wrote field notes. He didn't write entire papers, because he wasn't able to compose texts in the field. For him, writing was something that only happened back home in the office.

When Geertz wrote, he used a particular writing strategy: He started with a text, writing line for line and paragraph for paragraph, and when he came to the end of it, the text was finished. It didn't matter whether it was an article or a book. Although he worked with outlines, he didn't use them much when writing. Having finished a text, he didn't revise it. Thus, Geertz wrote a text from start to finish, spending a lot of time with figuring out what and how to write, before continuing with the next sentence or paragraph. With this writing strategy, he wrote one paragraph a day. He produced many books and articles this way, because during special periods he didn't have any obligations other than writing.

While this strategy seems to have worked out for

Geertz, he nevertheless didn't want to advocate it. In the interview, he expressed his hesitation to talk about his writing strategy, because he thought that it was a bad one, which nobody else should follow. He thought that good writers write a first draft without caring much about its quality. They also write nonsense if they can't find the right word, to complete the passage later. Geertz, however, wasn't able to do that, even though he wished that he could. He suspected that his problems had a psychological origin.

Whether or not Geertz liked his writing strategy and pace, this one seemed to work out well for him. Otherwise, he wouldn't have written his well-known studies and wouldn't have become one of the leading anthropologists in the twentieth century.

*(Source: Olson 1991)*

### **Niklas Luhmann**

Famous for his unrelenting effort to develop sociological systems theory and the theory of society, Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998) produced several dozen books and many more articles in his career. While that in itself is impressive, he was that prolific despite being a single parent of three after his wife died.

Although Luhmann complained about the lack of time in general, he still managed to use his available hours to the fullest. In an interview, Luhmann explained his writing habits. He obviously didn't have a regular writing schedule. However, when he was home and didn't have anything else to do, he was writing all day: 8:30 a.m. until



lunch time; 2 p.m. until 4 p.m.; and in the evening until 11 p.m. Between the writing sessions he walked his dog, took a nap in the afternoon or did other things.

While working for so many hours, Luhmann never forced himself to do anything he didn't like. He preferred to work on things that were easy for him. As soon as he didn't know how to proceed, he changed the task. At this point, the interviewers were curious, because it seemed that Luhmann was talking about doing things unrelated to writing. But they couldn't be more wrong: when coming to a standstill with one text, he just switched to another one, even if that meant beginning a new book.

Luhmann understood his strategy, which we can call patchwork writing, well. It allowed him to work on different texts in parallel, while avoiding being blocked. Although patchwork writing might not sound that organized, Luhmann knew what he was doing. Since he worked with his famous *Zettelkasten* (a card system), he only needed a plan for a text and to find the required cards and then to write. He stated that organizing the card system and retrieving the required cards took the most amount of time; writing a book took him less. After finishing a manuscript, he usually didn't revise it. So most of his time went into organizing the content of a text and then writing and not, as in the case of other researchers presented here, into revising a manuscript several times.

Using the patchwork writing strategy and leaving aside the revision phase might be one reason that many students and researchers have trouble reading his texts. As Hans-Georg Moeller (2012, p. 10) put it, Luhmann's texts are "extremely dry, unnecessarily convoluted, poorly

structured, highly repetitive, overly long, and aesthetically unpleasing". Luhmann's writing strategy had an effect on his writing style.

Luhmann represents a writer who didn't try to seek the perfect text, as he himself said. He instead kept on writing and refining his ideas from text to text. He seemed to have understood his own habits and used them to his advantage. Writing was not a chore, he said, but rather a need to let out all his ideas. He would even have preferred to work on different things at the same time, with 30 hours a day on hand.

*(Source: Luhmann 2002; Moeller 2012)*

### **Jacques Derrida**

Throughout his career, French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) was overburdened with writing projects, teaching and other work. Although he voiced his complaints, he nevertheless did what he had to do. He was one of those thinkers who dedicated much of his time – even during holidays – to his work.

Derrida woke around 6 a.m., drank a cup of coffee and worked for the next three hours. At 9 a.m. he joined his wife for breakfast. Sometimes he declared to have already completed his work, meaning having prepared his seminar. However, he often worked on until lunch, even though the house wasn't as quiet as it had been in the early morning. When he was alone at home, he wore his nightdress. He lost his sense of time and didn't take breaks to eat.

Derrida had a few writing habits: After having compiled notes, he would usually write his first drafts in longhand. If

the text was important to him, he would use a quill and not an ordinary fountain pen. Only after having written several drafts, would he begin to transfer the text onto his typewriter. The text needed the right tone and perspective, in order to be typed.

Although Derrida worked for three hours in the morning, he didn't spend them all sitting at his desk immersed in his work. He would write for fifteen to twenty minutes, after which he would get up, walk around or read a book. Derrida said that the more he was interested in something, the sooner he would interrupt his work again. Movement and changing positions influenced his thinking: he took notes after waking from a dream; he took notes while running; and he would use the notes and ideas when sitting at the desk. He knew that being on the move gave him good ideas.

Becoming increasingly famous, Derrida was asked to write texts. These writing occasions, as he liked to call them, almost always came from outside. He rarely wrote a text that he had initiated himself.

Whether due to him being a philosopher or due to his writing strategy, Derrida had a distinct writing style. He used language carefully to analyze and deconstruct an argument, thereby constructing complex and sometimes literary prose. After the publication of the book *The Post Card*, a journalist complained that it is no longer possible to understand Derrida, even though reading his texts has been difficult all along.

(Source: Peeters 2013)

## **Stephen Hawking**

If you didn't know him, you wouldn't assume that this man in the electric wheelchair is one of the most accomplished scientists. Stephen Hawking (born 1942) suffers from ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), a disease that has worsened since his diagnosis at age 21. Despite the fact that he can no longer move and relies entirely on other people, he is still able to think through complicated math and physics. He wrote and co-wrote several books, one of them a bestseller.

Despite being talented, he was lazy during his studies in Oxford. Only later, during his PhD, with the spark of inspiration, did he begin to work harder, even though his disease had already started to worsen. Soon after, however, he was no longer able to write. He relied on other people to get his writing done. The math he still did in his head, while talking with colleagues helped him to clarify his ideas.

Due to his dependence on other people, he developed daily routines. As a professor, his daily routine included preparation at home, getting to the office, going through the mail with his secretary, working at his computer or reading, having coffee with his colleagues, dealing with correspondence, eating lunch, working again until tea-time, counseling students with the help of assistants, and working some more before going home in the evening.

Working on a book with a co-author, Hawking had to dictate the text. In one case, it took them six years to complete the book. In the case of his book *A Brief History of Time*, Hawking closely worked with the editor. In the beginning, the manuscript was too complicated and

technical for a broader audience. Hawking wanted to publish the book with a publisher, who would also sell the book at airports, so he needed to rewrite the book. Other people assisted him during the revision process. Due to a treatment for pneumonia in the mid-1980s, Hawking lost his voice. Only when he received a computer to aid in writing and talking, could he resume the work on the book.

What Stephen Hawking accomplished is astonishing, despite his disease and the limitations connected with it. In other words: There are no excuses that anyone can use for not writing. If Stephen Hawking can do it, everybody else can do it too.

*(Source: White and Gribbin 1992; Hawking 1994)*

### **Slavoj Žižek**

The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (born 1949) publishes a lot – one or two books a year on different topics such as psychoanalysis, current political events and developments, and the economy. We might assume that he enjoys writing all these books, but that would be far from the truth. Although Žižek admits to being obsessed, it is not with writing, but rather its opposite.

As Žižek said in an interview, he avoids writing because the writing process horrifies him. Instead of giving in to the horror, he found a way to outsmart himself in order to produce text all the same. First, he takes notes of three to four pages, which form units. Second, he takes these notes and puts them in order to create a book. After having taken the notes, he convinces himself that the writing has already been done, although note-taking is not writing for

him. Assembling the notes, accordingly, is not writing either. With this „obsessional strategy“ (Olson and Worsham 2001, p. 254), as he put it, he succeeds in producing texts without writing.

When it comes to Žižek’s writing style, he seems to be similarly obsessed. He doesn’t consider himself a writer, because he doesn’t care much about style. All he tries to do is get his arguments across to the reader. As long as he succeeds, he doesn’t bother with the exact wording. Žižek’s focus, thus, lies on rendering information, as if he was a „thinking machine“ (Olson and Worsham 2001, p. 254), instead of aesthetics. With this „self-instrumentalization“ (ibid.), he tries to erase all the traces of him in the text. But as most readers of Žižek might have noticed, his neglect of style might represent his particular style.

Finally, he also seems to be obsessed with another thing: Žižek needs loud music when he works. As he said, he wouldn’t survive without it.

Slavoj Žižek certainly occupies an extreme position on the writing-strategy-continuum. And yet, his strategies seem to work out for him.

*(Source: Olson and Worsham 2001)*

## **Part Six: 10 Reminders for Academic Writers**

1. Writing means solving problems and taking deliberate decisions.
2. There are no hard and fast rules for writing. You have to find solutions and take decisions every time you write.
3. Know your writing habits – both good and bad.
4. Talk to others about writing. Share problems and solutions.
5. Stick to what works for you.
6. Get feedback on your writing.
7. You are responsible for your writing. You have to be able to explain every single decision you take.
8. Only frauds hire a ghostwriter.
9. Learn from mistakes and failure. Write to learn.
10. Writing is hard. Enjoy the challenge.

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