



Zerubavel, Eviatar 1999, *The clockwork muse: A practical guide to writing theses, dissertations and books*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

This book discusses issues that some writers face – e.g. anxiety, writer’s block, procrastination and burnout. It suggests ways to overcome these issues by developing a routinised approach to writing large projects, based on Zerubavel’s experience. His secret is to ‘develop better work habits’ (p. 2).

Strategy 1: Planning – create a time schedule and a routine pattern of work

While some people like to write only when ‘inspired’, experienced writers do not wait for inspiration, but rather allocate regular times for writing such as 45 minutes two mornings a week and write. Establish regular times during the week when you will write to avoid burnout and create balance in your life. Develop a schedule and ‘stubbornly’ stick to it – persevere. Slow and steady will get there; remember the story of the ‘Tortoise and the Hare’ (Aesop’s fables).

Strategy 2: The writing schedule – presupposes regularity

- *Set priorities* – develop a desirable proportion during the week between writing and the rest of your life; change your priorities as you go, design a weekly schedule.
- *The writing session* – What works best for you? Experiment. What is your ideal length of writing time? How long does it take you to settle down? How long can you concentrate? ¹ Don’t make sessions too short. Recognise when you can’t concentrate and STOP just before then. ‘Longer is not always better.’ (p. 20). Time periods may vary by what you are writing.
- *Time to write* – establish *when* you work best. Many people find it useful to write first thing in the morning. Track your effectiveness for a week to identify your pattern.
- *Ideals and constraints* – first mark all the times you cannot write (family, sport, sleep ...). You may be surprised about the few times you have to write, and so be determined to use them well.
- *Quiet times* – find your own private writing space ². Minimise interruptions from phone and email. When writing ‘be out of phase with our immediate social surroundings so as to minimise the risk of being interrupted when we are writing’ (p. 30).
- *Keeping your momentum* – pay attention to the constant flow of your writing. Consider how often you plan to write and try to write frequently. Train yourself to be efficient.
- *A-time and B-time* – use the times you can focus well (A-time) for your intense writing, and other allocated times for less intense/focused work (B-time), such as ‘cleaning’ data, checking references, planning the next chapter. B-time can happen when waiting for appointments, etc.

Strategy 3: A mountain with stairs – your writing is a collections of smaller pieces

- *Divide and conquer* – reduce the enormity of the task ahead by breaking it into smaller tasks. Write in manageable pieces. Set mini-goals that you can manage.
- *The outline* – break your thesis into chapters, then sections and then sub-sections. Create a blueprint, being aware that it is still flexible and will be changed over time. So create a tentative blueprint. This skeleton will help you avoid going around in circles.
- *Drafts and revisions* – Remember that you will write several versions of every chapter. ‘Much of our thinking takes place while we are writing’ (p. 48). ‘[without revisions] you may never get to find out how much deeper, more sophisticated, and more polished those pieces might have been had your revised that first draft two or three times’ (p. 48).

Writers on revising: Every book is worked over several times. I like to compare my method with that of painters ... proceeding, as it were, from layer to layer. The first draft is quite crude, far from being perfect, by no means finished ... After that I rewrite it as many times – applying as many “layers” as I feel to be necessary. A Moravia ³ (p. 48)

¹ 20 minutes seems ideal for concentration span. Use the ‘[Pomodoro](#)’ method of 25 minutes of writing → 5 min moving, walking, stretching and then be disciplined to write again. Aim to increase the number of 25-minute sessions.

² e.g. A quiet place at City West UniSA is the Research Student Zone in the Jeffrey Smart Building, JS3-04.

³ Moravia, Alberto 19654, ‘The art of fiction—Alberto Moravia’, *The Paris Review*, vol. 6, p. 29.

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Strategy 4: A project timetable – calculate how long you will need to complete you project

- *Estimating length* – allocate the number of pages to each chapter. ⁴ Overestimate the length of the chapters, so you can later reduce the length. This will act as a buffer for if you get sick, fall behind or have other commitments. With the next draft you can readjust the lengths of the chapters and the sections. Keep revising your overall timetable then too.
- *Pacing yourself* – consider how many pages you can write a day although this speed will change according to how much material you have already. Do not overcommit. Overestimate what you can do and underestimate your ability to do it.
- *Deadlines* – set your deadlines and add a few extra days for unexpected crises. Remember to take time off in between too. See the following example of a detailed project timetable. Invite friends to give feedback on your drafts (give them enough warning).

Section	Length (pages)	Pace (pages/day)	Time (days)	Deadline
2.4 Volunteering	11	2	5.5	28/11/2016

Strategy 5: The mechanics of progress – consider some mechanics of writing too

- *Getting started* – First write your first draft. It will be flawed and ‘very far from perfect’ (p. 81). Write as much as you can and do NOT revise until you have written the whole draft.
- *Moving along* – finally your writing will be linear but sometimes you might write in circles. To keep moving forward and not going in circles try not to reread what you wrote previously. Try to start the next writing session, where you stopped the last one. At the end of a session prepare the material you need for the next writing session, i.e. plan for the next day. Write the next draft in a completely new manuscript. Edit on the previous draft, and then create the next draft.
- *Closing* – after revising, ‘let go’ of the previous version. Celebrate when you have a new draft. Set deadlines when you will finish your project.
- *Storage & retrieval* – write down ideas, whenever you have them. Your ideas will become sharper, clearer and stronger. Keep writing and keep filing your notes ‘your building blocks’! Use colours, visual and spatial compartmentalisation to organise your thoughts. consider how many pages you can write a day although this speed will change according
- *Roadmaps & benchmarks* – develop a map for the whole document. Try using a 4-month plastic planner, cross out days you cannot write or can only write for a short time. Use stickers for the days you can write. Mark the deadlines on the planner too. The writing then becomes more predictable. Refer to the plan frequently.
- *Discipline & flexibility* – ‘It requires a lot of self-discipline to be ready to write whether you feel particularly inspired or not’ (p. 97).

Notes by Dr Monica Behrend, Research Education Adviser, UniSA

⁴ Remember that a PhD thesis at UniSA is usually a maximum of 80,000 words (~ 200 pages).