**Activities that support great academic writing**

Goodson, Patricia. 2017. *Becoming an academic writer: 50 exercises for paced, productive and powerful writing*. Second edition, Sage.

In her book, *Becoming an academic writer: 50 exercises for paced, productive and powerful writing*, Patricia Goodson (2017) outlines research-based principles that underpin good writing, and a healthy and happy writing process. These are:

* understanding the value of initially messy writing
* regular, deliberate practice
* regular feedback and social support
* identifying as a writer and accepting that anyone can become a great writer.

Goodson’s book provides a range of activities, summarized in this worksheet, to assist us to improve our command of the language, and to become an excellent academic writer. Each activity explains the goal of the activity, the amount of time needed, and an outline of the activity in Goodman’s terms. Each activity builds on the preceding activity so it will be helpful to read from top to bottom.

1. **Schedule your writing sessions**

**Goal—**Develop a writing habit and show up to write.

**Time commitment—**15 minutes writing practice six days a week

**Activity outline**

* Schedule 15 minutes writing time in your calendar every day for six days in the week.
* In that time slot, write about anything you like for 10 minutes (an academic text, research thoughts, even copy a bit of research text).
* With the remaining time (5 minutes) write whatever comes to mind without stopping to edit when thinking about the question: what does it take to get me to write (to begin or to continue writing)?
* In each scheduled writing time thereafter, take five minutes to answer the following questions:
  + What keeps me away from writing; what aspects of writing do I really enjoy; what aspects of writing do I dislike?
  + Reflect on how you treat your most important academic tool. Is it rusting away, out of reach or sight, or in need of repair, polishing, or sharpening? Or is it always right here, in a clean, airy palace, fully functional and ready when needed? In other words, how much time and how many resources have you dedicated lately to improving your writing?
  + Reflect on whether you see yourself as an academic writer. If the answer is yes, in what ways do you ‘wear’ your identity as an academic writer. In other words, how do others see you are an academic writer? If the answer is no, what keeps you from viewing yourself as an academic writer? Do you see yourself as being able to grow as an academic writer?
* Revise your writing schedule after some time and change the time slot if needed.
* Don’t ‘find’ your time to write. Create time and protect that time!

**2. Increase your writing time by 50%**

* + Go ahead and add one minute to your writing time each session until you have doubled your writing time.
  + Spend the first five minutes revising your reflections and identifying, firstly, reasons that facilitate your writing, and, secondly, three factors that keep you from writing.
  + Implement *one* strategy per week to remove an impediment to your writing, and one strategy that works to facilitate your writing.
  + Test and modify your strategy.

**3. Write quickly, edit slowly**

**Goal—**Practice separating generating writing, from editing writing, each of which involve different brain functions, the first creative, the second analytical. Perfect sentences don’t exist. Just write ‘crap’!

**Time commitment**—10min per session

**Activity outline**

* Write without stopping. Literally do not let your fingertips stop moving on the keyboard, for five minutes.
* If English is not your first language and you can’t think of a word, don’t stop, just write it in your own language.
* Then take five minutes to work through the ‘crap’. Sift out the good ideas, bring similar ideas together, delete repetition, generate sentences to add to what you have, and look up the English word/s for any non-English word/s.
* Build this into your regular habit. As time goes on and you build up more writing, you’ll spend more time editing and less time generating.

**4. Organise messy drafts**

**Goal**—Develop skills in organising drafts into paragraphs.

**Time commitment**—10 minutes

**Activity outline**

* Once you have a bunch of words, work on one page per day. Highlight one key idea that you want to keep. Copy and paste the idea into a new text.
* Go back to the messy text and check to see any sentences that have a similar idea. Copy any sentences that develop a similar idea into the new text. It doesn’t matter if the ideas are well written or connected, just focus on bringing together similar ideas.

**5. Keep and share a writing log or diary**

**Goal**—Keep your writing on track, hold yourself accountable to yourself and to others, give yourself positive reinforcement about getting writing done, and observe yourself as a writer. Research shows that those who log writing time are four times more productive than those who don’t. Those who share their writing logs are *nine* times more productive than those who don’t.

**Time commitment**—five minutes per session

**Activity outline**

* Begin or end each writing session by filling in a log. You can use a paper notebook, your calendar, an excel spreadsheet, or other means you prefer. Include the date and time of writing, total time spent writing, and which writing project you work on.
* You might also comment on:
  + what you plan to accomplish,
  + what was accomplished,
  + important decisions and reasoning behind choices,
  + how you felt about the session,
  + where to begin next session.

**6. Read about how to write**

**Goal**—Get inspiration from books that discuss writing struggles and joys, and strategies for improvement. Feel comforted by reading about how others have struggled in similar ways.

**Time commitment**—10 minutes per session

**Activity outline**

* Identify a book or blog you want to read.
* Read it for 10 minutes at the beginning of your writing session. Do not exceed 10 minutes. Don’t let your writing time become reading time.
* If you find a suggestion you find useful, note it down.
* Incorporate the suggestion into your writing practice.

**Feedback—some key principles**

* ‘Good’ feedback is feedback that helps the writer move forward.
* There are different types of feedback (evaluative, reader impact, expert-based)
  + Evaluative or critical feedback comments on quality, organisation, use of language.
  + Reader impact feedback focuses on the reader’s understanding, experience, reaction.
  + Expert-based feedback focuses on accuracy of content, and how content fits with or adds to existing knowledge.
* Different kinds of feedback are useful at different stages.
  + Evaluative feedback is less helpful in beginning stages of writing.
  + Reader impact feedback is helpful in early drafts.
* While feedback is integral to good writing, it takes time, so it is important to factor time for feedback into the planning process for your project.

1. **Get reader impact feedback on early drafts**

**Goal**—Get useful feedback on an early draft to help you to push the work forward.

**Time commitment**—five to 60 minutes

**Activity outline**

* Generate a list of people you are comfortable sharing even your worst drafts with. One name is good; don’t worry about a long list.
* Contact the person on your list and ask for their help.
* Schedule dates/times in your calendar for when you will send your draft to them and then meet with them.
* Honour your commitment.
* When asking for feedback on early drafts explain to your reader that it is a first draft and not very good yet. You might say, ‘I don’t need an evaluation of the quality of the writing as I know I will have to do a lot of work to improve it. At this stage I need help to understand the reader’s perspective: what do you think of the idea, will it work for the audience, what thoughts come into your mind when you read it, do you have any suggestions for a different approach, what take home message did you get from the text, what jumps out at you’.

1. **Get feedback on middle drafts**

**Goal**—Get reader and evaluative feedback on drafts from peers.

**Time commitment**—five to 60 minutes

**Activity outline**

* Generate a list of people in your discipline area you would be willing to share a middle draft with, and from whom you can receive both reader impact and evaluative feedback. Fellow PhD students are good.
* Contact the people on your list and ask for their help.
* Schedule dates/times in your calendar for when you will send your draft, and then meet.
* Honour your commitment.
* When asking for feedback on middle drafts explain that this is still a draft and not polished yet. You might say something like: ‘At this stage I need help to understand the perspective from a reader in our field area and to organise the coherence and flow of the text. Can you tell me about what you learn from the piece, what you were impressed with, how interested you think readers in our field would be? Are there any places in the text where you stumbled or had to read over to understand the meaning? Did it flow coherently? Can you think of anything I am missing’?

1. **Get feedback on final drafts**

**Goal**—Get expert feedback on drafts from supervisors, colleagues and other experts, but only after receiving (ideally more than one round of) reader and evaluative feedback. Because supervisors’ time is limited you don’t want to waste it on drafts that are still disorganised and that need to be edited. Supervisors are obliged to read at multiple levels so giving them early drafts risks burning them out on your piece, and you may become overwhelmed and demoralised when the draft is returned covered with markings. Even when you arrange to submit an early draft with your supervisor, which is a good practice, ensure that obvious grammar and stylistic errors have been removed, and ask your supervisor to focus on the content since you know the draft needs more work.

**Time**—five to 60 minutes

**Activity outline**

* Brainstorm a list of people from whom you would like expert feedback. This will include your supervisory panel, but try to include experts beyond your supervisory panel as well.
* Contact the people on your list and ask for their help.
* If possible, schedule a time to send the draft, and a make a meeting time.
* Honour your commitment.
* You might say something to your reader like: ‘I’ve been working on this piece for a while, and what I really need is expert feedback on the content. Could you comment on what you think of the piece overall, how it fits with the current literature, whether it contributes anything new, whether there any important issues or omissions, and where might I publish the piece’?
* Or, if the draft is still somewhat rough, you might say: ‘Please ignore problems related to grammar, punctuation, usage; I will fix these later. Could you comment on the content, is it correct, accurate, comprehensive, too detailed?’
* During your writing practice sessions, write your reflections on this process. Use no more than five minutes.
* Pay close attention to every comment made by your expert readers and make changes arising from the appropriate and useful feedback.

1. **Get regular feedback**

**Goal**—Start a writing group to help you to become comfortable and skilled in receiving feedback and to provide a mechanism for receiving regular feedback. Better quality feedback arises from the synergy and energy created when more than two people read and feedback on your work. Research suggests that one of the strongest predictors of well-being within the writing process is being embedded in a network of friends, colleagues, contacts, and resource-persons.

**Time commitment**—five minutes time set up, 60 to 90 minutes meeting time

**Activity outline**

* In the first practice session, spend some time reflecting on the kind of feedback you need most (reader impact, evaluative, or expert), or on whether you need motivation to stay on track more. This will help you to know who to invite into your group and how to organise your group.
* In the second practice session, generate a list of people who could be good candidates for the kind of group you need. Generate a list with more people than the group can hold as some people may decline your request. Three to five people is a good number for a group, but you need enough committed people to ensure that there are at least a few of you there at every meeting if some people can’t make it.
* Next, contact the people on your list and explain what you want to achieve, possible schedules, and the level of interest and enthusiasm of each individual. Focus in on those individuals who seem genuinely motivated (those who are not could dampen the group’s enthusiasm).
* Schedule and plan your first meeting and set an agenda. The agenda should include a discussion of ground rules, including meeting times, location, and use of meeting time. At this first meeting the group will want to discuss the following:
  + how time will be divided for reading and feedback (equal time for each participant is recommended),
  + what members need to prepare before the meeting (bearing in mind that if people are very busy too much preparation may make them reluctant to join, or to miss meetings when they have not done the reading),
  + who will lead the group—ensure everyone participates, keep track of time, communicate with the group.
* Hold your group meeting and take notes of the group’s decisions.
* In one of your writing practice session, spend five minutes writing and reflecting on how the group contributes to your work and on what could be improved.
* After feedback on your writing, ensure you incorporate the feedback you received into your regular writing sessions.

**11. Build vocabulary**

**Goal**—Master new terminology one word at a time. Practicing this exercise will increase your vocabulary by 300 words per year.

**Time commitment**—15 minutes per session

**Activity outline**

* Find a (preferably free) website that will email you one new word every day (eg visual thesaurus). Or randomly select words from a paper bound dictionary. Look the meaning of the word up using Google.
* Read about your new word. Consider its pronunciation, origins, and usage.
* Take a few minutes to practice using the word in sentences that could be used in your research writing. Try to use the word in three or four different sentences to explore its nuances.
* In addition, develop a list of words you are unfamiliar with, but which are used commonly in your field. Select your words from published research writing in your field. Check the meaning of these words, and then use six of them in generative writing, or writing that you produce really fast, without stopping.
* Develop your own glossary, or list of specialist terminology in our field alongside their precise definition or usage. Don’t be afraid to check the meaning of words you are somewhat unsure of. Include different usages or meanings of words when you find them used in different ways in your field.

**12. Polish the grammar**

**Goal**—Understand how a certain language works in academic writing, and identify patterns of problem areas in your own writing, one small step at a time.

**Time commitment**—15 minutes per session

**Activity outline**

* Choose a grammar website or book and read for 15 minutes before your writing session. You might simply read a few pages or select a specific grammar ‘rule’. Do not exceed 15 minutes. It’s important not to avoid writing by reading about writing. Reading one or more pages a day will add up quickly if you practice daily. You will end up reading more than you would have otherwise!
* Note down the main points. (Always write about what you read because reading alone will not ensure comprehension or improved writing).
* In your writing session that day, apply what you read about as you can in your writing.
* In addition, identify someone who will read one or more pages of your writing aloud with you and identify clumsy grammar that appears commonly (not just individual instances). Ask your reader how they would correct the text or consult a grammar web site or book for assistance. Return to your writing and edit only for this grammar pattern. You can return the draft to your reader and ask them if they think your corrections are appropriate, and then perhaps move on to consider a new grammatical aspect that might be improved.
* In addition, copy, *very, very slowly*, one or two paragraphs from a published research text in your field that you admire. You can do this activity in longhand rather than use the computer if this will slow you down. Don’t try to learn or memorise anything. Just go *slowly* to allow yourself to feel the writing and observe the writing as you go. Don’t worry about plagiarism; you will not use this text in your own writing. When you are finished copying, reflect on:
  + paragraph/s structure—first and last sentences,
  + was it well structured,
  + how were paragraphs connected,
  + did the author use passive or active voice,
  + were sentences long or short,
  + what technical words were used.

See if you can use the techniques identified in your reflection in your writing session.

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