

DORIS DUKE FELLOWSHIPS TIP SHEET

–advice from fellows to the field–

ISSUE 2

WRITING

Our research findings and worthy ideas have little influence if we do not communicate them with others. A primary way we do this is through writing. Writing a report, policy brief, article, or other document may sound like a simple task, but writing can be hard for many of us—even those of us who write for a living. Writing is a skill—you get better by practicing and by finding strategies that work for you. This tip sheet offers ideas about how to improve writing productivity and helpful resources to sustain the writing process. Remember when the writing gets tough, the tough keep writing. Write on!



Prioritize

- Be disciplined in scheduling writing time. Put it in your calendar and treat it with the same level of respect you would attending a class or meeting. If something unavoidable comes up, block out another time slot to write so the task does not “disappear” in a busy week.
- Consider how you are evaluated (e.g., writing vs. teaching vs. service) when you schedule the amount of time you should spend writing relative to other work.
- Write 30 minutes every day. Every. Single. Day. Do not wait for big chunks of time to write because they seldom appear.
- Write when you are sharpest. Consider writing first thing in the morning before checking email and engaging in other work.
- Avoid e-mail and other distractions when writing.
- Instead of taking a break to check email, use a break to stand up, take a walk, or get a snack/drink.
- Set the scene and get everything you need before writing. Play music or create a quiet space, go outdoors on a nice day, close your office door, or write in the company of others.
- If you are distracted by surroundings (e.g., housework at home), find a new place to write.
- Keep a list to jot down all the random to-dos that flood your mind when writing. Do not interrupt your writing every time something pops into your head.
- Ground yourself at the beginning of every writing session. Try focusing on your breath for a minute. Become aware of how your body feels in your writing position.
- If you feel stuck, try “free” writing, even about your current feeling or issues bothering you.



Invest Time

- Set a timer to write for a short period of time every day without interruptions (e.g., email, texts, phone calls).
- Start with a seemingly small daily goal (e.g., 30 minutes). You can always continue to write longer if you are on a roll, but this will help get you into a habit of writing.
- Time matters; however, more time is not always better. “Binge” writing does not work for many people (even when we think it does).
- Spending 15 minutes to come up with the perfect word is likely not worth your time during an early draft.
- Develop goals both broad (e.g., finish a manuscript by a certain date) and small (e.g., write the first draft of an abstract).
- Remember that reading, summarizing the literature, outlining, conceptualizing, diagramming, creating tables are all part of the writing process.



Build Accountability

- Draft a strategic plan for your major writing goals and include weekly tasks and timelines associated with reaching the goals. This will help you draft a realistic writing plan and is something that can be measured (and revised) over time.
- Communicate your timeline and goals with collaborators or mentors. Sometimes putting it in writing or a commitment to others can increase your self-accountability.
- Track your progress; log your writing time to see realistically how long it takes to write a specific section or complete a writing task in order to more accurately budget your time.
- Log all of your work time (not just writing) for a week or two, to see where you can make adjustments to improve your productivity.
- Track your writing progress. There are lots of tools out there that will allow you to track time spent writing or number of words produced. Just like dieters who keep a food diary lose more weight than those who do not, the secret to productive writing might be in gathering data.
- Join a writing group (in person or virtual). Weekly writing groups help establish consistent writing habits.



Consider Your Relationship with Writing

- Own the title of “writer.” You ARE a writer!
- Write many drafts; do not expect perfection with your first drafts. It is often better to simply get ideas out on paper in a quick and dirty draft to have a starting point.
- Try an outline or quick draft to start. It will often feel like there is something more to read or plan before starting, but you may find you do not need more resources or that you need different ones.
- Take the time to outline to help organize your thoughts and write more efficiently.
- Track your resistance to writing (e.g., distractions, thoughts, life goals). Identify simple distractions that can be overcome easily (and deal with them). Others may take more effort and require a formal action plan.
- Always leave a writing session with a clear place to start next time.
- Remember it is better to be done than to be perfect.
- The more you write, the better you will get. You will also learn to work through distractions more quickly.
- Celebrate EVERYTHING (e.g., finishing a draft, getting a rejection, submitting a revision, receiving an acceptance). Give yourself a treat, create a sticker chart, or create some other tangible short-term reward.

Recommended Reading:

Boice, R. (1990). *Professors as writers*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.

Lamont, A. (1995). *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life*. New York: Anchor Books.

National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity <https://www.facultydiversity.org/>

Silvia, P. J. (2007). *How to write a lot*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association

Zinsser, W. (2006). *On writing well (30th Anniversary ed.)*. New York: Harper Perennial.

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