

A New Series on Scholarly Productivity: ‘Are You Writing?’



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By *Rebecca Schuman* | OCTOBER 02, 2018

I was not suited for academe in several — possibly important — ways. For example, I spaced out through every colloquium I ever attended, and will happily admit to never having read a single journal in my discipline cover-to-cover for "fun." But during the five years I was in graduate school and the five years after, I scrabbled around as an adjunct and postdoc — not to mention the five I've subsequently spent as a sort-of-full-time writer — the one thing I've never had a problem with is finishing my manuscripts on time and getting them published.

- I completed my dissertation in German in two and a half years whilst also learning to teach.

- I finished a monograph (which was immediately accepted for publication) in the two years after that, with a full teaching load of new preps and minimal institutional support.
- I wrote my first book of commercial nonfiction (and innumerable articles like this one) with a newborn baby and no child care.

And I

did all of that punctually, with a little time left over to binge-watch TV and, in later years, to attend to the incessant needs of a teeny-tiny tyrant. I cannot possibly overemphasize the fact that I am neither unusually gifted nor very industrious nor really disciplined. I finished all of that writing with a deceptively simple system of doing just a little bit of work, mostly every day, and trusting that the "brilliance" (or acceptability) of the whole would come together through the drudgery of many, many, many (many) smaller, less-brilliant parts.

That's the whole system. It worked, and it continues to work. Since 2013, when I landed my first of many postacademic gigs as something called a "dissertation coach" (for an established company in California), I've been helping other people do the same.

As far as I can see, there are only two downsides to being a writing coach (aside from the term "writing coach," which I don't like). The first is that, by talking through my clients' obstacles, I've inadvertently signed up to do care work in the few hours a week for which I pay someone else to do care work. (Whoops.)

The second problem is a moral quandary: This kind of individualized assistance is akin to having a personal trainer for one's writing productivity — and often costs as much. People like me — who have taken skills that academe didn't want and offered them in private practice — are often called vultures. I understand that. (Disclosure: This column is not an endorsement of any specific service, or an effort to solicit business. I am not accepting new clients at this time.)

I wish the writing-coach profession didn't have to exist. Because that would mean graduate programs routinely taught project management, long-term pacing, and monograph preparation. But I don't have to tell you that most doctoral programs don't teach any of those things.

Academics' work habits are famously bad. Dissertation advisers may be many things: brilliant, inspiring, eminent, interesting (or, sometimes, narcissistic, needy, toxic, terrifying). But they, too, didn't learn project management and long-term pacing in their graduate training. Chances are their own dissertations, and every

book thereafter, were completed by the proverbial skin of their teeth, sometimes on time and more often not.

The cult of terminally put-upon busy-ness is entrenched in higher education. Many an academic cannot come to your party, or on a playdate with your kids and theirs, or to dinner, or to coffee, or even text you back, because They. Are. Just. So. Busy. All. The. Time. Their every conversation with colleagues contains some form of the odious question: Are you writing? And yet these are the very people who are, or were, in charge of teaching you how to write a book. The whole system is borked, so it's no wonder you're stressed.

Although maybe you're not. Maybe whatever system you have is different from my system, and it works great for you, and you are mortally offended that the likes of me has been given space to continue my vulturely ways. I hear you. But before you go, perhaps you'll allow me a few questions about your writing process and, on the larger scale, your scholarly and personal well-being.

A Totally Scientific Quiz

1. In the three-day period before your last major research deadline, did you:

- Spend more than five hours a day at work on this research project?
- Spend more than one hour a day worried or panicked about said project?
- Complete more than 10 percent of that project within those three days?

2. Has a (non-laboratory-based) research or writing deadline ever:

- Caused one or more of your children to be sad that you were unable to spend time with them?
- Caused a partner to be sad that you were unable to spend time together?
- Caused you to cancel a social plan in which you actually wanted to participate?

3. Have you:

- Taken a full weekend off in the past month?
- Gotten through an entire vacation, intercession, or family/medical leave without feeling that you had to use that "free" time to "catch up"?

If you answered yes to any part of questions 1 and 2, or no to any part of question 3, I have news for you: Your work habits are interfering with your life. You may be all right with that, and of course I respect your decision. (Your loved ones, on the other hand, may have a different story to tell.) But if you are not all right

with it, I'm here to help.

For the next several months, I'll be offering suggestions on how to write more — and better — with less angst. I will demonstrate how you can be your own personal GPS, rather than your own personal 1980s-era backseat driver ("You missed the exit, you schmuck! Now we'll be late!"). And we'll discuss how to accustom yourself to a moderate and reasonable amount of consistent work, and recognize (and dispatch) that voice in your head that echoes every one of your toxic colleagues as it whispers, "Are you writing? Are you writing? Are you writing?"

If you want one, this is an intervention.

For the time being, I will leave you with a first suggestion — a small good-faith gesture to make it worth your while to have read this far. If you're embroiled in an article or chapter revision that you feel will never end, try this approach:

- First, read through the whole thing as if you were a thorough peer reviewer, tasked with locating all of the work's problems — but not with solving them. Mark up every problem you see, but don't do anything about any of them yet. Do this for as little as 20 minutes a day — but no more than 60 — on three to five work days a week, as your teaching schedule allows, until you've read through the whole thing. (How long this takes will depend on how long your thing is, but it's a non-negotiable step.)
- Next, take a rest from the manuscript for a day or two. Try to set aside all work, but if you can't, at least do something other than that project. Then come back to your draft and catalog the problems you find on a 1-to-3 scale of difficulty, with Level 1 for anything you can fix in less than 30 minutes; Level 2 for anything you can fix in less than two hours, and Level 3 for something major that is, let's face it, gonna take awhile to correct.
- Then, instead of getting bogged down in the most difficult problems, fix the easiest ones first. That way, by the time you're ready to tackle those Level 3s, you'll have momentum on your side.

But that's going to take too much time, you might protest. It won't. It's a realistic account of how long it takes to revise an article without sinking into a vortex of self-loathing and gibberish. If you think you can (or should) revise a 25-page article in less than, say, three to four weeks (with a full teaching load), then that's the kind of magical-thinking trap that gets you flunking my quiz.



You are, of course, welcome to ignore this advice and go on doing your thing. However, if you do try any

of my ideas, I'd love to hear about the results (pro or con). Please don't hesitate to reach out in the comments, or via email. I am looking forward to helping you work better and be happier — if, of course, you want to.

Rebecca Schuman received her Ph.D. in German from the University of California at Irvine in 2010. She is an essayist, translator, consultant, and author, most recently, of Schadenfreude, A Love Story (Flatiron Books, 2017). "Are You Writing?" is her new series on scholarly productivity.

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