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Rewarding Your Writing

| Tricking yourself into productivity.

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“Gradhacker” has hosted at least two excellent articles on starting up writing habits even when writing seems like the last thing that you want to do. However, with titles like “[Nose to the Grindstone](#)” and “[Write, Dammit](#),” it’s easy to see that our common feelings toward writing are frustration and annoyance. Despite writing often being the primary means of finishing a doctoral program and communicating our ideas, we often take an antagonistic approach to it, forcing ourselves to write every day because we feel like we should (instead of because we want to).

While there’s no doubt that we’ve all cursed at a Word document once or twice in our careers as graduate students, it’s time we find more productive ways of existing with our work. If you’ve ever pushed and punished yourself in order to make writing happen, then it’s time to re-approach your relationship to your work and form writing habits that are based in care rather than frustration.

Track Your Habits

When we think about how much we write, we tend to either underestimate (I never write enough!) or overestimate (I know I can write this with one good session!) how much writing we actually do and need to do. In the end, both leave us feeling guilt-ridden and overworked. While it’s tempting to remain ignorant of how much writing you do, tracking your writing actually makes it easier to step away from work guilt-free.

While there are different methods for tracking writing, the most straightforward approach is to establish for yourself what counts as a successful writing session and then make note of the days when you meet that goal. Your goal can be time-based (write for 20 minutes), word count focused (write 250 words), goal centered (write literature review) or even something more accessible, like, any new words on the page count as a successful writing day. No matter what your goal is, find a fun way to mark the days when you met your goal. I recommend letting your inner child splurge on some [fun stickers](#) to add to a calendar, planner or hand-drawn tracker.

Not only will you be surprised by the amount of writing that you actually do, but you’ll feel better about the work you’re getting done and will be able to step away from work without feeling like you need to rush back for more.

Reward Yourself!

While tracking your writing can certainly leave you feeling more productive and less guilty about your work, it can still feel underwhelming to look back at a filled-in weekly chart and have nothing else to show for it. Writing should be enjoyable, a reward in itself ... but it usually isn't, which is why I insist that you start rewarding yourself for your work. As graduate students we know that self-starting is essential to our work and most of us are more than ready to coach and push ourselves to meet our goals, but we often forget about treating ourselves for meeting those goals.

While you can choose to reward yourself however you see fit (sleeping in, a fancy coffee, new clothes, an at-home spa day, movie tickets, etc.) I recommend making the reward something that you really want and not something tied to work (no new stationery to boost your productivity, for instance). It's also imperative that you always fulfill your reward so that you build good habits and a positive association between writing and rewarding. For myself, I write out a list of small rewards, and at the end of the week, if I've met three or more days of my writing goal, I draw a random one so that each week is a surprise.

Rough Draft

As graduate students, we're more than familiar with the process of drafting and revising, but too often we expect even our drafts to be fully usable pieces. In the service of tracking your hard work and rewarding yourself for that work, it's time to let your rough drafts be rough. If you find yourself staring down a blank Word document, hands frozen above the keyboard, then it's time to take the pressure off.

Starting is often the hardest part of writing, so use the first few lines of your day for a little word vomit -- write about how you're feeling, where you think the project is headed, or what your goals are for that day's session -- and allow yourself to get some words on the page that may or may not lead anywhere. If writing has become drudge work, don't be afraid to use a goofy font, a sprinkling of expletives or some train-of-thought writing to just get something on the page. Most importantly of all, however, let this something (usable or not) count toward your writing goal for the day and reward yourself for the time you spent working.

A Little at a Time

If your writing process consists mainly of waiting until the office is clean, the coffee's hot and the stars are aligned before writing everything in one mad dash, then this one's for you. There's nothing wrong with making your writing time enjoyable with treats and a clean space -- in fact, it's a good tip in itself -- but you should be able to write in less than perfect conditions.

Make your writing goals for each day or week small ones. Give up the marathon writing sessions for a while and instead set smaller, more accessible goals to be done each day. This way, you build up a habit of writing, you learn to write with the little time that you might have between courses or waiting for the bus, and you get to work toward a sustainable relationship of writing consistently, tracking that work and rewarding yourself with something you like.

It's time to approach your writing time as a manageable and enjoyable practice. Start with small goals, focus on consistency, allow your drafting to be a low-stakes event and, most importantly, let any writing count toward your daily/weekly goals and be consistent in treating yourself for meeting those goals. If you've motivated yourself this far with the constant threat of the deadline stick, then maybe it's time to try the carrot.

How have you built a healthier and happier relationship with your writing?

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