

Step Away From the Delete Button



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By Rebecca Schuman | MARCH 31, 2019

Editor's Note: This is the fifth column in the "Are You Writing?" series on scholarly productivity. Read the first four essays [here](#).

The largest corpus of academic writing in the known universe is in a subfield that you probably know well. In fact, you have almost certainly contributed to it. Its

volumes have never been collected in a single place, but they would fill a library the size of the Pacific Ocean. You could study this subfield for 10 lifetimes and never even begin to crack its surface.

Have you solved the riddle? I'm talking about the Corpus of Perfectly Good Sentences Deleted For Some Reason.

As a writing and productivity consultant, I have worked with dozens of academic clients in the past seven years. Every one of them has, at one point or another, bemoaned their lack of progress by saying some version of, "I just keep writing things and deleting them, and writing them again and deleting them again!" By the end of any given week, these academics have written — and deleted — thousands of words, with nothing to show for their hours of pained labor. They come to me more than a little discouraged.

The first thing I ask them is: "Why did you destroy your own work?"

Invariably, they answer: "Because it was no good!"

At which point I say what I'm going to say to readers now: Of course it was no good. You were pulling complex ideas out of the ephemera. If what you had to say were simple enough to say beautifully on the very first go, it would be too facile to warrant advanced academic study. You deleted what you wrote because you expected it to meet a standard that is near impossible.

And here's the kicker: By deleting it, you've actually prevented your future self — an even smarter and better-educated version of the person you are now — from being able to go back to those lost sentences and hone them into something that is beautifully rendered.

Now I don't like to cook, so usually I don't enjoy cooking allegories, but there really isn't a better one for this predicament: Just like following a complex recipe, creating even a small subsection of an academic manuscript takes multiple steps, and there are no shortcuts — at least none that won't end with you in a metaphorical puddle of batter on the floor.

In order to get to the point where you have a highly complex idea expressed in lucid, polished prose, you have to go through multiple versions of almost all of your sentences. And those early sentences are almost certainly going to be — in the parlance of "the kids" — downright fugly.

It takes considerable intellectual stamina to come up with an idea good enough to publish in an academic journal. It takes equally considerable intellectual and artistic stamina to come up with a beautiful, lucid turn of phrase. Few if any human beings are able to do those two things simultaneously, so you should not expect yourself to. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that any scholars who claim to have mastered that impossible feat are either terrible writers, or their ideas are so mediocre and basic that they're probably not worth writing down in the first place.

Think about it: If you've been teaching undergraduates for more than five minutes, you're well aware that many of their essays are completed in extreme haste. You've probably even lamented that very fact as you've spent untold hours trying to grade their prose. But what if your advanced students or junior colleagues — a senior doing a capstone thesis, a graduate student writing a dissertation, or an early-career faculty

member writing a paper for peer review — gave work to you for serious "final" critique that was obviously the first pass they'd ever given that work? You would be apoplectic, and rightly so.

So why on earth do you think your own first drafts should be sublime? Are you really that much more special than literally everyone you have ever worked with, to hold your own work to a markedly different and cruelly impossible standard of greatness?

Those sentences you just wrote about your latest project? They are definitely not perfect — yet. I see you sitting there with your finger hovering over the delete button. I get it: Those imperfect, messy, jumbled gibberish words are just staring at you, taunting you, whispering: "Oooh, your impostor syndrome is real!" So of course you want to zap them immediately; get rid of the evidence. But stop yourself. Why not keep those sentences around for a while and give them a chance to become perfect?

If you've been reading this series, you know I've already outlined a writing-productivity strategy that has worked well for me and my academic clients. The short version: Summon 25 minutes of laser focus on your writing, one to three times a day during your usual work hours. Do that three to five days a week for ... as long as it takes.

If you're following that strategy (and even if you're not), the first step to overcoming Delete-ism is this: For an entire week, you are not allowed to remove a single word you write in any of your 25-minute writing sessions. Nothing. Don't even cut and paste material from your manuscript into a detritus file (we'll return to the role of detritus files once you've cold-turkeyed the Delete-ist fervor).

There are several relatively simple remedies to Delete-ism, and I suggest trying them until you find the one that least makes you want to cry. (If you are an avowed Delete-ist, any method of saving your tortured prose is probably going to make you want to cry at first, just a little. This is normal.) The best way to write without deleting is to signal to yourself — *within* the document — that what you have just written down is not binding. For example:

- **Bracket meta messages to yourself.** This method is my personal favorite. When I am just trying to get my ideas down, without obsessing over the writing, I bracket brief notes to myself after a problematic passage: [FIND A WAY TO TIE THIS BACK TO THE THING ABOVE THAT SAYS X AND Y AND ALSO SOMEHOW Z, TKTKTKTK]. Say whatever works for you in the brackets. The point is to signal to yourself that you know this wording is a placeholder.
- **Make the text itself a different color.** As you write, rather than delete any of the prose you already hate or are uncertain about, turn it a different color. Make it yellow, gray, pink, whatever. You are signaling to your brain — and, more important, to the irrational perfectionist emotions that have wormed their way into your consciousness disguised as facts (which they are not) — that this prose doesn't yet all the way "count."

The idea is to take the pressure off. Give yourself the freedom to get your ideas out, all the while trusting that your very smart future self will (tomorrow, next week, even next year) have the chops to chisel that prose until it's good.

Once you've broken the write-and-delete habit — after a week (or two) of going cold turkey — you're "allowed" to delete again. But do it *judiciously*. Leave the prose-in-question overnight, and then decide whether to delete it. But here's the funny thing: Once you've broken the habit, you'll find the craving to immediately erase any subpar prose will have subsided.

For many of the academics I work with, trusting their own research and ideas is often the hardest part of the writing process. Not only do they hold their own research to the kind of impossibly high standard they would never impose on even their dearest friend, but they treat their ideas like ephemera — apparitions that will grace them only once in a brilliantly correct way, and then disappear forever.

Let's take a moment to understand how absurd that is. Your research is something you have been studying for literally years. You are very, very, very good at it. The problem isn't that you don't know what you're talking about. The problem is that nothing worth saying can be simultaneously worked out in your head and translated into smooth sentences at the same time.

So, what are you waiting for, friends? Try the Delete-ism Cleanse for a week. You have nothing to lose but a bookshelf worth of perfectly good writing that the world will never get to see.

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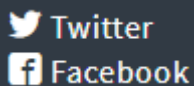
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