

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Hardest Part of Writing Is Restarting



By Rebecca Schuman | FEBRUARY 15, 2019

Editor's Note: This is the fourth in a new series, "Are You Writing?" Read [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), and [Part 3](#).

It should be straightforward enough for you to stay consistently productive as a scholar as long as you have the right plan:

- Start your projects far in advance.
- Work in [short bursts](#) on most days, and at a [reasonable time](#).
- Don't get bogged down [trying to read \(or reread\) everything](#) ever written on your topic.

If only life worked that way. Instead, reality usually intervenes, and all of our neat-and-tidy plans get shot straight to the [Bad Place](#). Then, suddenly, it's the first day of a new term, and we realize we haven't cracked our research project in ... oh, sweet merciful deities, a long, long time.

When I work with academic clients as a writing and productivity consultant, I often tell them the hardest part is getting started, but that's not entirely true. The real hardest part of a research project is restarting it after a long absence. Amid loose ends and notes that no longer make sense, one also must navigate the minefield of self-loathing and disappointment (not to mention a cranky editor or two).

Well, in the words of a scholar much greater than I: "[You must chill.](#)"

Before you can go back to the project, you have to heal thyself (perfunctorily, at least). Returning to an abandoned piece of research without sufficiently dealing with what made you retreat in the first place is like getting back together with an ex without discussing what led to the breakup. Ask yourself two questions:

Are your demons primarily work-related? Things like: overpreparing for class, getting bogged down in committee work, taking on too much work, dealing with disruptive students or academic-dishonesty issues, or receiving hostile critical feedback.

Or are your issues mostly personal? Things like: a health crisis, the death of someone close to you, a divorce, or the delightful but productivity-obliterating arrival of a child (or two).

With an honest assessment in hand, you can determine what you can resolve and what you can't. In the case of deeply personal crises such as deaths and illnesses, the only real tincture is time. What you can and should do, however, is give yourself a break. You, your life, your health — are more important than anything else. If the tenure clock is running, you may be able to stop it for a semester or a year. And if you've already got tenure or aren't ever going to get it, then take advantage of that fact and remove the pressure for now.

In the case of less-dire situations, especially overwork, you have quite a bit more room to maneuver. Create some serious boundaries for how much time and effort you will devote to class prep and grading. Because guess what? Spending too much time on that isn't the mark of a great pedagogue. It's the mark of

a procrastinator with poor time-management skills.

The cardinal rule of college instruction is that course prep will expand to fill the time you give it — so don't give it a disproportionate amount of time. If you teach a two-hour graduate seminar on Mondays at 3, then don't start prepping for it in earnest until Mondays at 9 (presumably, you've already read the material at some point in time, because you assigned it).

If you have a squillion papers to grade, use my time-tested [rubric method](#): Every student gets a rubric and a grade, and anyone who wishes for detailed comments about a paper, and a line-by-line reading, is welcome to get one during office hours or by appointment. No student who actually wishes for your detailed feedback goes without it. You're a professor, not a martyr.

Now that you've made some peace with the destroyers of your time — and thus created a welcoming psychological space for returning to your writing project — it's time to create the physical space for it in your work day.

In my [November column](#), I introduced the primary strategy that has worked for me and my clients: Carve out 25 minutes of laser focus on your research and writing, one to three times during your work day. But for some stalled projects, especially those that have grown monstrous in your absence from them, even devoting that much time can seem too daunting.

This is where the Daily 15 comes in. The 15-minutes-a-day technique is tried-and-true: As a graduate student, I remember reading about it in Joan Bolker's iconic *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*. That 1998 tome is now rather dated, but the 15-minute advice is sound.

To illustrate the importance of the Daily 15, I like to use a visceral metaphor. When I was a kid, I had to get one of my molars pulled before the adult tooth was due to grow in, and my dentist put in something called a "spacer" to keep my other teeth from migrating together in the interim. When my adult molar finally came in, there was space for it to do so without turning me into a snaggletooth monster and costing my parents a fortune in orthodontia.

Believe it or not, the same space-saving principle holds true for your research: Even if you don't have the inspiration or the big smart thoughts right this second (due to the aforementioned demons of all sorts), you

need to cultivate and fiercely maintain the physical and psychic workspace for the moment when you are ready (which may be sooner than you think).

So if you're blocked from an old project that's haunting your thoughts, take a mere 15 minutes — every day, without fail — to do something, anything, even tangentially related to it. Jot down a list. Read three paragraphs of an article. Free-write a thesis statement, even if it's not very good yet. Edit a page or two.

What you do in those 15 minutes a day doesn't have to be sequential or masterful or even make a lot of sense. It's about reintroducing your research project into a schedule that has heretofore crowded out that work.

There's a pervasive mythology about academic scholarship — that it has to be the product of some sort of inspiration bordering on magic, and that if you have the brilliance, that's all that really matters.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Brilliance (or something close to it) is, I'd say, about 3 percent of creating a publishable article or monograph. The other 97 percent is patience and the stamina to be able to work, over and over, on something for which the end might not be in sight for a while. (Some people call that sort of work "drudgery," but my New Year's resolution is to be more positive.)

In short, the answer here is to stop waiting for inspiration and start training yourself to work consistently, no matter how you feel.

Once you've committed space in your workday to an abandoned project, start filling your Daily 15 with slightly more regimented tasks. Then, eventually, isolate one to three days a week when you have a bit more time, and expand the 15 minutes to 45 — and then, if you're lucky enough to have that kind of time, to 90 minutes. By now you might even be cooking on the project, and wish you had more time to work on it.

There is rarely a large academic project that goes off without real life interrupting it. Interruptions are simply unavoidable. But with a little bit of honesty, a set of reasonable expectations, and a few relatively simple techniques, those interruptions don't have to become work-killing demons.

*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*. "Are You Writing?" is a series on scholarly productivity. Her website is [Academic Adjacent](#), and her Twitter handle*

is [@pankisseskafka](#).

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