

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## The Worst Writing Advice in the World



By Rebecca Schuman | NOVEMBER 04, 2018

*Editor's Note: This is the second column in a new series, "Are You Writing?" Part 1 is [here](#).*

I have heard many irritating suggestions on scholarly productivity in my time, but none get my blood aboil faster than this bit of wrongness: You must rise at some ungodly hour — 5 a.m., better yet make it 4 or 4:30 — and then force yourself to write for two or three hours. Maybe even four.

It's ridiculous advice. Academics who tell you with a straight face that they wake up every morning at 4, sit at their desk in scholarly rhapsody for hours, and then go do a full day's work are not being truthful. And even if they are, they probably spend most of that time staring off into space and yawning. At any rate, they shouldn't be bragging about tragically mismanaging their time and doing long-term damage to their health.

Now, if you are the sort of person (whom I have never met) who truly enjoys early rising, and your 4-to-6-a.m. shift is the high point of your day, and somehow you still get (mostly) enough sleep, then, fine. I'm not talking to you. Ignore me and go about your day. (Get some more coffee, for example.)

I'm talking here to everyone else — everyone who's been told that rising super-early every morning is the best (or, God forbid, only) method of improving your scholarly productivity.

As a prolific author myself and a writing coach — and as someone who did get up today at 4 a.m. (not to write, but because my 3-year-old is a sadist) — I am here to reassure people who enjoy a good night's sleep: You *can* get your research done, on time, without dragging yourself out of bed at a ludicrous hour.

Because make no mistake: Doing some sort of "negative-first shift" isn't productivity. It's performative misery, a.k.a. the lifeblood of academe. And the reasons it's downright wrong to recommend — or, worse, idealize — this unhealthy behavior are numerous:

- First, it's based on the Great White Academic Male caricature of the 1950s, he whose dearth of "domestic" responsibilities allowed him the time to spend 14 hours a day in his tower of brilliance. Everything else about academe and the working world has changed since then, but somehow the Platonic image of the ascetic tower-dude persists.
- Second, it presumes that you cannot do any useful research or writing in less than two or three hours of total uninterrupted silence.
- Finally, it presumes that the business hours of a working day preclude any "real" research or writing.

Those premises are false. The true sign of scholarly discipline isn't being willing to (pretend to) wake up in the middle of the night just to replicate the outdated, elbow-patched model of yore. True discipline is being willing to chuck that model, in favor of a far more flexible approach: Summon 25 minutes of laser focus on your work, one to three times *during* your work day.

I realize you may be thinking, "I can't get any substantive writing/research done in 25 minutes!" Well I am staring at two books with my name on them that suggest it is possible. Why not try? What could it hurt? Sometime this week, when you're in your office or workspace, do this:

- Turn down the volume on your cellphone. Close your email program.

- Close your eyes for two seconds and take a deep breath. Look a clock or set a timer and say aloud: "25 minutes. Go."
- Then, either free-write something related to what you're working on, pull up a document and tinker with it, or read and take good, responsive notes.
- After 25 minutes, stop and go back to whatever nonsense was occupying your day.

But, but, but, you might say, that doesn't amount to much. It will if — twice a day during the work week and then two or three times on the weekend — you spend 25 minutes of uninterrupted time on your writing or research. Note: Do this on both weekend days only if you are: (a) teaching at least a 4-4 load; (b) in a new job with time-consuming new course preps; (c) a grad student or scholar with a full-time day job outside of academe; or (d) a slow prepper or grader (we'll tackle that problem in a future column).

When I work with writing clients, I often help them set up a daily schedule. Let's say you are a full-time, nontenure-track professor in a humanities discipline. You're teaching a 3-3 load of classes you've taught before, but you want to find time both to maintain your research agenda for the tenure-track job market and to be with your family (a working spouse, two school-age children and a pet). Here is a sample daily schedule I set up:

- 6:30 a.m.: Up, small tyrant wrangling, school drop-off.
- 9 a.m.: Office, 25 minutes of focused work. Do not open email program until after this 25-minute session.
- 9:30 a.m.: Check email and tweak prep for first class. Maybe do a bit of grading.
- 10:30 a.m.: Teach.
- 12 p.m.: Eat lunch.
- 12:30 pm: Do another 25 minutes of focused work on writing/research. (Sure, you may be tired, but not as tired as you would be doing this at 4 a.m..)
- 1 p.m.: Tweak prep for second class.
- 1:30 p.m.: Teach.
- 3 p.m.: Hold scheduled office hours. (If no one shows up, do some grading.)
- 4:30 p.m.: Pick up small tyrants, resume wrangling.
- 7 p.m.: Grade or prep while small tyrants do homework.
- 9 p.m.: Clock out for the day and do whatever you like. Do more work if you want, just not too late.

Of course that schedule would have to be adjusted during deadlines or exam periods, when you might have to do more work in the evenings or on the weekend. But if you begin to integrate just that one single (uninterrupted) hour of focus into your business day, in a single week you could write 1,500 to 2,000 words, annotate six articles, or edit 10 to 15 pages. In a month of seemingly minimal but consistent work, you could finish the skeletal draft of a short chapter, or do about a third of an annotated bibliography for a lit review, or edit most of a 40-page article.

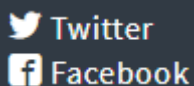
So instead of forcing yourself to get up at 4 a.m., getting very little done, and then being tired for three days, why not give this 25-minutes-twice-a-day approach a try? Maybe even now.

*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. Her "Are You Writing?" series is about ways to improve scholarly productivity.*

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