

**Advice for New Faculty Members:
Getting Your Writing Program Started**

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Advice for New Faculty Members: Getting Your Writing Program Started

The first year or two as a new faculty member is overwhelming. Often, the first priority is to get your classes in order, make sure your textbooks are in the campus bookstore, and to prepare your lecture notes (borrowing liberally from your graduate school course notes) and exams. In the meantime, you're still trying to figure out where the library is, which committees you should avoid, and how to negotiate with your department chair for a TA in your undergraduate course. Before you know it, it's the ninth week of the second semester of your first year and you haven't written a thing since completing the dissertation—which seems like years ago (even if it has only been six months).

By now, you've also been inundated with advice from well-meaning senior faculty members, administrators, and friends. Much of the advice is helpful, some of it is contradictory ("avoid doing service in your first year," "get yourself on a couple of committees so people get to know you"), while other suggestions can be ignored altogether. Very little of this advice actually helps you to think about how to get a program of research and writing going so that you can start working your way towards a positive tenure decision.

While I'm reluctant to ply you with more advice--which you may be even more reluctant to follow--I would like to suggest that there are a few things that you can do that will help you feel more in control of your professional activities, foremost among them your writing. Clearly, writing is difficult to accomplish under the best of circumstances. And, being a new assistant professor isn't the "best of circumstances," unless you enjoy being pulled in 27 directions simultaneously. Most people I know who are successful academic writers need time to organize and think and need to be free of distractions that pull them away from the task at hand—that is, actually producing a written document or two.

But, getting started with academic writing requires more than simply finding a quiet place and a good time to write. Usually, our writing is done in the service of reporting our research. And, if you take your first academic job, but find that you have no clear idea about how you're going to begin a program of research, then you are at somewhat of a disadvantage. One of the nice things about being on the tenure track, however, is that you have some time to get your research program going—but don't idle for too long.

There are several strategies that I and others (see Note) have found to be very useful for managing our writing activities. Getting help from experienced others is often critical in the early years of an academic career. Devoting attention to the organizational aspects of writing is also critical. A disorganized approach to writing usually contributes to sloppy writing. Being persistent and setting and managing priorities is essential to productivity. If you give up too easily or if you can't decide what activity is more important to accomplish today or this week, you will likely see few of your writing projects come to fruition. Finally, securing funding that will support your research and writing activities is essential. In the following pages, I elaborate upon each of these key ideas and describe several strategies for becoming a more productive academic writer.

Assistance, Or Getting By With a Little Help from My Friends

To paraphrase John Donne, no academic writer is an island, and so you should give much consideration to the merits of collaborating with others. There are several possible approaches that you can take to engaging in collaborative work. For example, think about forming a team with other faculty members to share your research and writing. Commit to meeting on a weekly basis, and at the same time and in the same place. Consider working with a senior faculty member who can serve as a mentor for you. An alternative strategy is to partner with a third- or fourth-year faculty member—someone who, like you, is fairly new, shares your enthusiasm, and has been around long enough to have learned a few things and developed some good work habits, but not so long that they’ve lost their “edge.”

Even though you may be working as part of a collaborative writing team and find that other members of the team have many interesting ideas, learn how to “*just say no*” to the projects they invite you to work on—unless these really excite you. If you don’t share their enthusiasm about the topic, you will not follow through and get it published.

This brings up another difficult issue. What do you do when senior professors encourage you to work with them on their projects? It’s easy to be lured into working on various faculty members’ research projects, but if you’re not careful, you can spend much of your time advancing their research agenda, while losing sight of your own. You really need to devote your time and efforts to *your* writing. After all, you are the one who will be going up for tenure and promotion—the senior faculty members already have it. The only good advice here is that it is important to maintain healthy, positive relationships with these folks. So, be selective of whom you choose to work, be collegial, and work on only those few “outside” projects that lend support to your research agenda.

Another good strategy is to find a writing mentor. This person may or may not be the senior faculty member with whom you are collaborating. He or she can be a faculty member outside of your field or department. Your writing mentor can be anyone who understands the demands of academic writing and who writes well. You need someone who will give you honest, direct, and quick feedback about your work. This last characteristic is most important. You don’t want someone who is going to sit on your manuscript for a month.

It is also time to begin making a break with your graduate school adviser or dissertation director. This can be difficult if your dissertation director maintains control over the data that you have collected and analyzed. But sooner or later, you are going to have to become autonomous if you are going to build an academic career. And, sooner is always better. Once you’re on the tenure track, you’re no longer a graduate student. So, using your best diplomatic skills, begin to chart your own course. Developing this professional independence can also help you take control of your writing.

Get a graduate assistant or an undergraduate student worker—someone who can do your library work and photocopying. Even if your department's budget won't allow it and you can't pay for the help, you may be able to find a willing volunteer or a student who will work in exchange for independent study credit (but in this case be sure to give the student work that is meaningful). For example, graduate students that are interested in your work may jump at the chance to co-author a paper. Thus, you can begin to mentor the next generation of academic writers.

If you struggle with your writing skills, don't be ashamed to utilize the services of your college or university's writing center. While such services are generally targeted to students, the editorial advice, organizational tactics, and assistance with grammar and structuring an argument that are offered (usually by graduate students in English) are invaluable to any writer. So, swallow your pride—after all, just because you've written a dissertation doesn't make you a Hemingway—and march over to the writing center, manuscripts in hand.

Another useful strategy is to identify good writing models—that is, people in your field whom are judged to be excellent writers—and learn from their examples. All good writers have other writers whom they admire. I teach a doctoral seminar in writing for publication. In this effort, I've identified a few examples of people whom I consider to be good writers—writers who craft clear, simple expository texts—and I share their articles with students. Together we go through these examples, line by line (sometimes word by word), in order to understand how these writers have arranged their arguments and expressed their ideas. We discuss *what* the writers have told us and *how* they have told it to us, and what they have left out—and *why*. Patricia Alexander, Joel Levin, Michael Pressley, and in particular, John Ogbu, are four academic writers whose journal articles are uniformly outstanding—but there are many others. Find your own models.

Organization is the Key

In addition to garnering some assistance with your writing, it is also crucial that you develop good organizational skills. There are many actions that you can take that will improve your organizing abilities and thereby contribute to your scholarly productivity. Be careful with your time. Schedule a day each week to work at home (or in the library) and do your writing then.

This will help you to make writing a regular part of your work. Otherwise, it will get pushed to the back burner. There are always course preps and committees that will take the place of your writing—if you let them. If you are unable to work at home, then make a habit of closing your office door—and don't answer it. Have caller ID installed on your office phone and only take calls from your mother.

Do your research and writing first thing—*prior* to your teaching preparation. It is easy to put off writing in lieu of teaching preparations, but it is a mistake. During the regular academic year, try to have your classes scheduled on the same day (or two days at the most). While you should be writing every day, you should try to avoid teaching every

day. Alternatively, find the time of day when you are most alert and more likely to do your best writing (e.g., early mornings or late nights). Then, use that time wisely and efficiently (e.g., do not check your Email).

Strike a balance between your teaching and service responsibilities and your writing activities. Write on those days when you are not teaching and in which faculty and committee meetings are not typically scheduled. If you have to teach in the summer because you need the money, teach your courses in bulk. That is, teach intensive courses that meet for shorter periods of time and then save a month or two just for writing. You can worry about the pedagogical limitations of these intensive courses *after* you get tenure. If you teach an online course, insert that time into your weekly planner for teaching and giving students feedback. If your colleagues see you in your office when you'd otherwise be in a face-to-face class, don't allow them to use this time to hold more meetings for you to attend. You may not physically be in a class, but you can say, *No--I am in class at that time so I cannot attend the meeting.*

Sometimes, a systematic approach to writing can be helpful. Early in my career, I employed a method for organizing my ideas and writing projects, which was borrowed from a senior colleague. Following his lead, I hung a bulletin board in my office and got some push pins and index cards. I then created several columns on the bulletin board that concretized the steps leading from an idea to a published manuscript. For each writing idea that I had, I typed it on a card, and then tacked the card in the far left-hand column, under "Idea." Then, as my writing progressed on the project, I moved the card from one column to the next, e.g., → planning → data collection/analysis → first draft of manuscript → feedback → "final" draft (optimistic, yes) → submitted to journal. This was a great way to track my progress on several writing projects that were going on simultaneously.

Professors are usually goal-oriented individuals, but we don't often explicitly state these goals. I think it is a good idea to set clear goals for writing. Target the number of manuscripts you want to write, the number of publications you'd like to achieve, the number of grants you want to submit, and the presentations that you want to give during the academic year. Try to be realistic. Set small writing goals for yourself each week. Make yourself accomplish something, even if it seems hardly anything, on a paper each week. It is not enough, of course, to simply set goals. Monitor your efforts and assess your progress towards achieving these goals. Take action when you fall short, but remember to reward yourself whenever you meet your goals.

Identify 6 to 8 journals in which you want to publish your work. Familiarize yourself with these journals, what kinds of articles they publish, the accepted manuscript style, and the editors and reviewers. Talk to editors at AERA and attend their workshops. There are at least 3 or 4 sessions and workshops at AERA this year where you can meet and chat with journal editors, or learn more about writing for publication.

Finding a direction for your writing. Part of the organizational process is determining what you going to write about. For the new assistant professor, the initial forays into

writing for publication typically involve reworking the dissertation into a publishable article. By all means, strive to publish all or part of your dissertation! Publish more than one paper derived from it. The “least publishable unit” can be helpful here—early in your career. I managed to wring six publications from my dissertation. It wasn’t easy. I was fortunate in that I was co-editing a book with my dissertation director and got a chapter in the book. Also, I had conducted an experiment as well as collecting extensive survey data, so I was able to publish data from different parts of the study. Again, a bit of planning can do a long way.

Are you unsure about the focus and direction of your research? Do you feel isolated and disconnected from what is happening in the larger arena of your discipline? It's easy to get bogged down in the daily drone and political intrigue of your own department or institution—and to lose site of how your work connects to your discipline. However, if you let the field serve as your muse, you can't go wrong. In other words, keep up with the latest research in your field, join associations like AERA, and draw upon the research and authors who are doing work in the top journals to scaffold your research and writing. Also, don't be afraid to e-mail or call senior faculty members in your field. One of things I've learned is that most professors are very happy to talk about their work! Consulting with your field's leaders is especially helpful if your department or college lacks senior faculty within your discipline.

Find an interesting niche in which to work and drill down deep. Also, think big picture. Is there a good model or a generative framework for your research? If so, you might have two papers where you thought you only had one. A research project may have any number of practical implications, for example. So, both a research article and a paper written for a journal in an applied field may be feasible.

Persistence + Priorities = Productivity

Persistence gets manuscripts published. Persist on a manuscript even if it gets old. Find a way to update it and get it published, if possible. For example, my colleague Jan Holt and I recently finished a manuscript that we have labored over, set aside, and returned repeatedly to work on, for the better part of five years. We had to do some revising and updating, but--mostly at Jan's insistence--and finally, at my realization that the manuscript is a pretty good piece of research, we finished it and sent it off for review. So, try not to ever give up on a piece of writing that you are doing. On the other hand, you also need to know when to cut your losses and move on to the next project.

In much the same way that you have set writing goals, you must think about your professional priorities. For example, avoid doing too many conference presentations. These efforts typically do not count for much with promotion and tenure committees. I've seen many vitas chock full of conference presentations (*where do these people find the travel money?*), but very few publications. Remember, if you are running from conference to conference, you will have less time to get a manuscript in shape for publication. But, if you are traveling to conferences to present papers, get yourself a laptop. Write while waiting in the airport and when on the airplane.

Committee work is another area where you may want to re-think your priorities. Obviously, committee work is essential, but junior faculty members are sometimes overly eager to demonstrate how valuable they are and they volunteer for every committee opening. Other times, you may have no choice about your service obligations. But, if you find yourself getting assigned to too many committees, ask your department chair for protection. You can then say that your chair told you to say no to more committee work. Thus, you do not look like a bad person and you will not feel guilty for declining yet another opportunity to chart the future course of your department or college.

To return to the issue of teaching for a moment, remember that teaching does not have to be an impediment to writing. Consider doing your research in the areas that you teach. In doing so, both your teaching and your writing are likely to improve. Write about your teaching activities and make this a priority if teaching is important to you. Several journals are devoted exclusively to the improvement of teaching in higher education, such as *Teaching of Psychology* and *Teaching of Sociology*.

Money, It's a Hit

Finally, as we all know, having a little money can go a long ways towards improving one's productivity as a writer. Particularly for the academic, having funding to "buy out" one's teaching time is very helpful. Usually, the new faculty member begins at a distinct disadvantage here. But, there are some things that you can do right away that will be very helpful over the long term. First, find out about your college or university's programs for funding small projects or start-up research, and then apply for one or more of these grants. More than likely, if you receive an award, it will pay for a month or more of summer salary and free you from teaching then.

Within the first few weeks of your new academic appointment, get over to your institution's Sponsored Projects office. Get to know the editors and budget personnel—they will be immensely helpful to you in grant writing and in finding potential funders. Attend their workshops on grant writing. Grant writing is, after all, *writing*, so you should approach the task in the same manner in which you perform your other academic writing.

Think about submitting grant applications to private foundations that support academic work. Their written applications are usually much briefer than those required for the U.S. Department of Education, NSF, and NIH. Successful applications submitted in your first year will provide funding for your second year and are a tangible sign of early career success. Make grant writing a part of your routine and keep that funding rolling in!

Conclusion

I have provided a few strategies for planning, organizing, and managing professional writing activities. In one form or another, these strategies have been very helpful to me and others in beginning and then maintaining a regular program of academic writing. These strategies are by no means foolproof and adopting any or all them will not guarantee that your writing activities will be fruitful and your writing products will land

in the premier journals. Getting started as an academic writer is one of the most challenging tasks that a new faculty member faces. The better prepared you are for these activities, the more successful you are likely to be. Hopefully, the ideas I have shared will be helpful in beginning your writing career.

Note

Curtis J. Bonk (University of Indiana), Jill Salisbury-Glennon (Auburn University), Jennifer Schmidt (Northern Illinois University), David Shannon (Auburn University), and Lesa Vartanian (Indiana University-Purdue University, Fort Wayne) shared several strategies with me that they have used in becoming effective and productive academic writers.