
Writer's Forum—Get Started and Write: Advice for New Faculty

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M Cecil Smith¹

Abstract

This paper describes several strategies for organizing, collaborating on, persisting in, and funding professional writing activities that can benefit new tenure track faculty members. Establishing and maintaining a regular program of academic writing is essential to a successful career in higher education, but initiating and maintaining a program of consistent writing activity is very challenging because of the competing responsibilities new faculty members face. The better prepared the new faculty member is for academic scholarship, the greater their likelihood of success.

Keywords: Academic writing, advice, productivity, tenure track faculty, writing

Get Started and Write

The first year or two as a new faculty member is overwhelming. Often, the first priority is to get your courses in order, make sure that the textbooks are in the campus bookstore, and prepare your lectures (borrowing liberally from your graduate school course notes) and exams. In the meantime, you are still trying to locate the campus library, determine which committees you should avoid, and negotiate with your department chair for a teaching assistant in your undergraduate course. Before you know it, it is the ninth week of the second semester of your first year and you have not written anything since completing the dissertation—which seems like years ago (even if it has only been six months).

By now, you have also been inundated with advice from well-meaning senior faculty members, administrators, and friends. While much of the advice is helpful, some of it is contradictory (“*avoid doing service in your first year,*” “*get on a couple of committees so people get to know you*”), and other suggestions should 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.

¹West Virginia University

Corresponding Author: M Cecil Smith, College of Education & Human Services West Virginia University Morgantown, WV 26506-6122

Author Email: MCecil.Smith@mail.wvu.edu

While I am 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 the distractions that pull them away from the task at hand—that is, actually producing publishable manuscripts.

But, getting started with academic writing requires more than simply finding a quiet place and a good time to write. Usually, academic writing is done in the service of reporting research findings. If you take your first academic job, but find that you have no clear idea about how you are 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 (and usually an abundance of institutional supports in place) to get your research program going—as long as you don't idle for too long.

There are several strategies that I have found to be very useful for managing my writing activities. Through my role as associate dean, and in charge of faculty development, I have also put these strategies into place in a formal support program for tenure track faculty. In the following, I elaborate upon these strategies for becoming a more productive academic writer. First, working with--and getting help from--experienced colleagues and mentors is often critical in the early years of an academic career (Goldman, Hamburger, & Ottolini, 2014; Thorndyke, Gusic, George, Quillen, & Milner, 2006). Second, devoting attention to the organizational aspects of writing is critical. A disorganized approach to writing usually contributes to sloppy writing. Third, 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.

Organization is the Key

Organizing your work and focusing your writing efforts are essential for success. If you have completed a doctoral dissertation, then you already have important experience in organizing your work. An unorganized dissertation is an uncompleted dissertation. Now, as a tenure track professor, you have many competing priorities to manage. But, do your research and writing first—before your course preparation or service obligations. It is easy to put off writing in lieu of these responsibilities, but it is a mistake. There are several actions you can take that will improve your ability to organize your work and, thereby, contribute to your scholarly productivity.

First, you must manage your time carefully. Schedule a full day each week to work at home (or in the library) and do your writing then and there. If you are unable to work at home and the library is too distracting, then make a habit of closing your office door—and do not answer it (and do not check your email). Find the time of day when you are most alert and likely to do your best writing. If your institution has a membership in the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity (<http://www.facultydiversity.org/>), check out the excellent resources they provide, such as the Faculty Success Program, to help new faculty members structure their work schedules and improve their productivity.

Ask your department chair to schedule your classes on the same day (or two days at the most). While you should be writing every day, you should avoid teaching every day. If you have to teach in the summer because you need the money, then teach your courses in bulk. That is, teach intensive courses that meet for 4-6 weeks and reserve a month or two only for writing. You can worry about the pedagogical limitations of these intensive courses *after* you get tenure. If you teach online courses, insert the online time into your weekly planner. If your colleagues see you in your office when you would otherwise be in a face-to-face class, do not allow them derail this time to hold more meetings. 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*. Also, remember that teaching does not have to be an impediment to writing. Consider writing about your teaching if teaching is important to you. Several journals are devoted exclusively to the improvement of teaching in higher education, such as *Teaching of Psychology*. This and other such journals may be appropriate venues for your work.

Second, be explicit about your writing goals. Specify the number of manuscripts to write, publications to achieve, and grant proposals to submit. Try to be realistic and set attainable writing goals for yourself each week. One hour of daily writing results in seven hours over a week, and 112 hours over a semester; that much writing time should result in two finished manuscripts. That is four manuscripts each year (not counting summer writing time, which should produce yet another manuscript). If you are able to get two of every five manuscripts published, by the time that you go up for tenure and promotion, you are likely to have upwards of 10 published papers. Identify and familiarize yourself with four or five journals where you want to publish your work. Understand the types of articles published, the required manuscript style, and the names of editors and reviewers. Talk to the editors at professional meetings. For example, there are several sessions at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting where academic writers can meet journal editors. Many other professional meetings have similar “meet the journal editors” sessions. For a 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! Carve out and publish more than one paper from it, if possible. The “least publishable unit” (Owen, 2004)—that is, the minimum amount of information that can be used to generate a peer-reviewed publication—can be helpful here.

Third, a simple system for tracking the progress of your writing projects can help you keep these projects organized. Early in my career, I employed a method for organizing 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 created several columns on the board that concretized the steps leading from an idea to a published manuscript. I typed each idea on a card that I tacked on 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, as shown in Figure 1. This visual reminder helped me monitor progress on multiple writing projects, and was very motivating. Online task organizers and phone apps serve much the same function as an “old school” office bulletin board.

Figure 1.

A tracking system for the production of manuscripts

Stage of Development

Ideas and planning	Data collection and analyses	First draft of manuscript	Share manuscript for feedback	Draft revised and completed	Submitted for review
ú	ú	ú	ú	ú	Paper 1
ú	ú	ú	ú	Paper 2	
ú	ú	ú	Paper 3		
ú	ú	Paper 4			
ú	Paper 5				
Paper 6					

Fourth, if you struggle to write well-polished manuscripts, do not be ashamed to utilize the services of your college or university’s writing center. While such services are often targeted to students, the editorial advice (usually given by graduate students in English) is invaluable to any writer. I have had the pleasure of editing five books and handbooks in my field and, so, I have edited the writing of dozens of scholars. It may surprise you to learn that, even among the very best of these, some scholars do not write particularly well and, therefore, need strong editorial assistance. You can avoid this problem by swallowing your pride and marching over to your campus writing center, manuscripts in hand.

Collaborative Writing

To paraphrase John Donne, no academic writer is an island, and so you should consider the merits of collaborating with others. Some caution is advised here, as collaboration can be problematic for new faculty members who are expected to demonstrate their ability to come up with novel ideas on their own, work independently, and have at least a few single-authored publications. But, there is also a growing emphasis on team-based science (Team Science Toolkit, n.d.), or collaborative efforts to address complex problems, and some of this thinking is spreading across disciplines.

There are different approaches to collaborative writing, including those that result in independent work. A good idea is simply to spend time writing in the presence of other faculty writers where you can share your research, talk through ideas, and getting advice from others about overcoming roadblocks to writing. Surveys of both new and established academics have shown several benefits received from collaborative or group writing, including intellectual (e.g., opportunities to exchange ideas and feedback) and social (e.g., opportunities to work with other like-minded people) rewards, as well as improving one's writing and editing skills (Magnuson, Davis, Christensen, Duys, Glass, Portman, et al., 2003; Page, Edwards, & Wilson, 2012). For writing projects that are truly collaborative and result in multi-authored publications, each contributing author should get first authorship on at least one manuscript among the group's papers.

Another caution: It is easy to be lured into working on other colleagues' research projects. If you are 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; and, in the case of senior faculty members, they already have it. It is important, of course, 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.

Writing mentors. Another useful strategy is to work with a senior faculty member who can mentor you. This person may be from outside of your field or department. Your writing mentor can be anyone who understands the demands of academic writing and the challenges of getting your work published. You need someone who will give you honest, direct, and quick feedback. This last characteristic is most important. You don't want someone who is going to sit on your manuscript for a month. While some institutions and departments have formalized mentoring relationships (Thorndyke et al., 2006), new faculty members can expect that they may have to seek out mentors on their own. Do not be afraid to email or call senior faculty members in your field. 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.

While you are establishing a mentor-mentee relationship, 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 independent if you are going to build a successful academic career. And, sooner is always better. Once you are on the tenure track, you are no longer a graduate student. So, begin to chart your own course. Developing this professional independence can also help you take control of your writing.

Also, 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 occasionally teach a doctoral seminar in writing for publication. In this effort, I have identified a few examples of people whom I consider to be good scholarly writers—writers who craft clear, coherent, and informative 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*. There are many excellent writers in the social sciences and education. Find your models, read their work carefully, and strive to emulate their writing (but find your own voice).

Persistence + Priorities = Productivity

Persistence gets manuscripts published. Persist on a manuscript even if it gets old. Find a way to update it (collect new data) and get it published. For example, a colleague and I recently completed a manuscript that we have labored over, set aside, and to which we returned repeatedly for the better part of five years, until we

were able to polish it and send it off for review (and publication). 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. Avoid doing numerous conference presentations. These efforts typically do not count for much with promotion and tenure committees. I have seen many curriculum vitae 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, unless you particularly enjoy writing while waiting in an airport or when squeezed into an airline seat.

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 too eager to demonstrate their value and so 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 committee work. Thus, you do not look like a bad citizen and you will not feel guilty for declining an opportunity to chart the future course of your college.

Money, It's a Hit

A little money can go a long way towards improving one's productivity as a writer. Having funding to buy out 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 institution'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.

Second, within the first few weeks of your new academic appointment, go 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 that task in the same manner in which you perform your other academic writing.

Third, think about submitting grant applications to private or corporate foundations that support scholarly work. Their application requirements are usually much briefer than those required for the U.S. Department of Education, the National Science Foundation, or the National Institutes for Health. Successful applications submitted in your first year will provide funding for your second year and are a tangible sign of early career success.

Conclusion

I have provided a few strategies for planning and organizing your writing projects, collaborating with other academic writers, persisting on writing tasks, and obtaining funding to support academic writing activities. In one form or another, these strategies have been helpful to many tenure track faculty members. Getting manuscripts into the publication pipeline is one of the most challenging tasks that new faculty members face. The better prepared you are to initiate and carry out your various writing projects, the greater is your likelihood of success.

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