

The Practice of Writing

In the game of publishing, consistency beats brilliance. This does not mean that brilliant ideas do not matter. Who would not love to develop an innovation in a field that would profoundly affect the lives of others? Practitioners and faculty in the human services fields want to help. We want to have impact and change the world. However, it is important that we not wait until we have a brilliant epiphany before we write. Perhaps brilliant, transformative ideas are not the only ones that should be written down (and perhaps these types of ideas only can come about in the context of writing more routine, ordinary insights). Perhaps the goal should be providing meaningful, valuable contributions to our professions. Expecting anything more may create too much pressure and lead to debilitating blocks and limitations. Besides, more than one brilliant scholar has been denied tenure for not having developed the practice of writing and so not publishing. To be successful in publishing articles, you need to develop writing as a practice or discipline.

In this sense, writing is similar to meditation. It is very hard to meditate well if you only do so once in awhile. Meditating only when you want to reduce stress may provide some benefits, yet many of the most powerful effects demand daily practice. When you meditate daily, meditation becomes integrated into the core of your life. Over time it becomes both easier and more beneficial. Having a daily meditation practice forces you to be disciplined, consistent, and focused. Over time, you experience new depths, insights, and benefits. If you miss more than a day or two, you come to feel as if something were missing, as if something were not right.

The same is true with writing. When you are out of practice, the blank sheet is daunting. However, when writing has become a central part of your life, words and ideas tend to flow, if not effortlessly, at least more smoothly. Daily or near-daily writing can even become like a meditation practice, something that takes you out of yourself, connects you to different parts of your personality, and helps you let go. When writing becomes a friend, a daily routine, it loses much of its anxiety-producing qualities. When you do not have to worry whether you will be able to produce because you already are producing on a consistent basis, you are free to consider what you want to write about and who you want to become as a scholar.

What I am suggesting is that we treat writing as a creative, life-inspiring practice. This clearly demands an attitude shift for many of us. It is not enough to wish this relationship into existence; it requires practice and work, including work on the psychological and emotional barriers that you identify in yourself. It also can mean learning to view writing as a vehicle for becoming more fully who you are. For some, this may be an extreme and unhelpful goal. For those of you who do not wish to see writing in this almost spiritual light, at the very least you nevertheless will need to develop a practice of writing.

Developing rituals is a valuable way to create a practice of writing. Rituals mark the end of one period or event and the beginning of another. Developing rituals around writing says, "Now I move from this past activity to writing, which is all I will do with this time." This book-marking of time will help you view your writing time as something special, and signals that other activities can wait until you are done with your writing.

Whereas I sometimes write in my office at the college or in cafés during the day, I do my best writing at home, late at night. I like to write in my oversized leather easy chair. It has a good large footrest and two very wide stuffed armrests. On each armrest I can place four or five articles. My laptop fits easily into my lap and my arms rest comfortably by my side. Before I sit down to work, I brew myself a cup of green tea (or even pour myself a very small snifter of single malt scotch). I sit in my chair and drink about half a cup (this would be the tea), savoring the gentle tastes and aromas. Almost ritualistically, I remind myself how lucky I am to be able to have this time to write and enjoy my tea. I remind myself that my goal is to write either one page or for one hour, and anything beyond that is pure gravy.

I strongly encourage you to develop your own writing ritual, one that helps you to see writing as an enjoyable and enriching activity. Try to incorporate objects and experiences that you enjoy into your writing.