

Want to Publish More? Then Train Like an Athlete.

For many years, I have observed new faculty members devote enormous time to their teaching, neglecting their research. When I recommend putting a greater priority on research, they listen appreciatively but postpone action until “things aren’t so busy” — a time that never comes.

Then, in early 2008, I came across a short, punchy book by Tara Gray titled *Publish & Flourish* (Gray, 2005). It spells out a 12-step plan to become a prolific academic author and cites research to back up the plan. Gray’s plan enabled me to support faculty and graduate students to become much more productive.

The foundation of Gray’s 12-step program is quite simple: write for 15 to 30 minutes every day. Yes, that’s it: the core requirement is daily writing, at least five days a week, preferably seven.

Gray draws heavily on the work of Robert Boice, who studied the habits of productive new academics (Boice 1990, 2000) and found that daily writing is the key to success. Should this be surprising? Coaches expect their athletes — swimmers, runners and so forth — to train daily. Junior athletes are expected to show up for training every day, at the same time. Swimmers put in the laps and runners put in the miles. This sort of training enables dedicated high school athletes to achieve times better than world champions a century ago.

So what were top athletes doing back then? Those were the days of amateurs, usually from the upper class with spare time and access to facilities, who trained when they felt like it, typically on weekends. Very gentlemanly. But their performances weren’t outstanding by today’s standards.

What about writing? Most academics seem to be operating like the gentleman athletes of the past. They wait until they feel like writing. That usually means when they have a big block of time, or are forced to meet a deadline.

Boice found that aiming to write in big blocks of time is not a good approach. The first problem is finding a big block. An earnest academic might say, “I’ll wait until the weekend ... or until teaching is over ... or until I’m on sabbatical.” Some never get started at all. Then, when the putative writing times arrive, it is all too hard to actually write.

The second problem is that a big block of time for writing makes the task seem onerous. Some writers are able to overcome their inertia — often when a deadline is looming — and push themselves into a marathon session of frenzied writing. This is exhausting. When finished, there’s little energy left for writing on following days. It takes a while to

recover before mobilizing the mental strength for another lengthy session. Weeks can go by with only a few days of actual writing.

This pattern is analogous to a weekend athlete who is physically exhausted after a long workout and takes days to recover. Boice calls this pattern binge writing. It's analogous to drinking or eating too much — you feel terrible afterwards.

Most academics learn binge writing from doing assignments in high school or undergraduate years. Bingeing becomes increasingly dysfunctional as tasks become larger. Writing an essay overnight is possible, but completing a 300–page thesis requires planning and sustained work.

Boice's alternative is simple: brief regular writing sessions. For academics, the easiest regular pattern is daily. A daily writing session might be for half an hour, or even less.

Many academics, as soon as this option is proposed, begin a series of objections. "It takes me quite a while to get started — to get myself immersed in the subject." "I can't just turn on inspiration at will." True enough. If you write infrequently, it does take a while to get back into the topic. If you write in binges, you won't feel like doing it again soon.

Regular sessions provide a solution to these obstacles. When you get used to writing every day, you don't need as much start-up time because you were dealing with the topic yesterday. The result is greater efficiency, as memory is primed and maintained more easily.

As for inspiration, Boice (1984) found that waiting for good ideas simply doesn't work very well. Writing is the crucible for sparking ideas, rather than ideas being the trigger for productive writing.

The core of Boice's and Gray's prescription for productivity is daily writing — but not too much. The idea is to make writing so inoffensive, over so quickly, that doing it doesn't seem like such a big deal. When expectations aren't so high, it's easier to overcome your internal censor, that little voice that says to you, "What you're writing is no good. In fact, it's crap. Give up and wait for a better time."

Perfectionism is a deadly enemy of good performance. It's like being judged every time you write a sentence or paragraph. It's far better to go ahead, make mistakes and learn from them. Rather than expecting great output from a burst of frenzied inspiration, the idea behind Boice's brief regular sessions is to work with moderate daily expectations, knowing this will lead in time to better results.

Writing programs

My next step was to encourage others to adopt the Boice-Gray writing program. I started with my PhD students, most of whom were highly receptive. Six months into the program, one of them, Jody, wrote “It is just wonderful, and I know if I keep it up I will get better and writing will become easier for me.”

I also set up programs with faculty and graduate students in the Arts Faculty. One of the participants, Nichole, wrote that the program has “provided me with a non-threatening way of untangling my messy thought process, thread by thread.” Running these programs enabled me to learn much more about obstacles to writing and what helps to overcome them.

Boice and Gray recommend that writers make themselves accountable to someone, as this will help sustain the habit of writing regularly. I asked my students to send weekly totals to me listing the numbers of minutes they had written each day and the number of new words produced. That way I could assess how they were doing and discuss, in our weekly phone calls, ways to fine-tune the program.

In helping others use the Boice-Gray writing program, I make some specific recommendations. I suggest making notes about the points to be covered in your new writing, doing this a day or week beforehand. I recommend that when you sit down to write, you close or remove all books, articles and other polished text. Why? Because reading the polished text switches your mind into its flaw-noticing mode, the enemy of creating your own new words. I also recommend not reading yesterday’s writing, but instead using just your notes to provide guidance to today’s writing.

I also recommend closing the door, turning off the telephone, closing email and web applications and generally removing all distractions. Producing new words, for many writers, is a delicate process. Interruptions are temptations to do something else.

Some academics say they are so busy they have no time to do 15 minutes of daily writing. What this usually means is that they have put writing too low on their priority list. These busy academics spend hours preparing lectures, marking essays, attending seminars and committee meetings — and checking emails, surfing the web, and gossiping with colleagues. Devoting 15 minutes to writing at the beginning of a nominal eight-hour working day can’t make much difference to getting other things done, can it?

The title of chapter 4 in Boice’s 2000 book, *Advice for New Faculty Members*, is a single word: *Stop*. If the first principle of productive writing is to start, the second is to stop — before doing too much. For regular writing, you need to feel fresh when you start. If you feel worn out from too much writing yesterday or the day before, then you may postpone your session until tomorrow, starting a cycle of boom and bust, namely binge writing. So, Boice says, stop sooner rather than later.

Gray in her 12-step program made the advice more specific: write for 15 to 30 minutes per day. This means stopping when you get to 30 minutes. That may not seem like much, but it's only the writing part. There's a lot of additional work required before this becomes publishable prose: studying key texts, obtaining data, running experiments, seeking comments on drafts, submitting articles, and perhaps revising and resubmitting. Writing is the core activity, something akin to the highest intensity part of an athletic training program, but it has to be supplemented by a lot of other work.

I added one tweak to the Boice-Gray program. I ask participants to begin each 15–30 minute session by writing new words, for 5 to 20 minutes, and only doing other writing activities, such as taking notes or editing previous text, after the new words have been produced. I request this because composing new text is, for most writers, the most difficult task they face and the one most commonly postponed.

One of the common laments of people using this program is “I don't know what to write,” often accompanied by “I'm not ready. I need to do more reading, or thinking, or investigation.” This is an indirect expression of the familiar formula of researching first and then writing up the results. Boice and Gray want to turn this on its head. Their motto: “Write before you're ready!”

This means starting writing even though you don't know enough about the topic, you haven't read all the background material and haven't done the experiments or fieldwork or interviews. Indeed, you're just starting work in a field that's entirely new to you. How can you write about it?

One approach is to write about what you're going to do. Describe the things you know and the things you need to find out. Tell about the experiments you're planning and how you'll set them up. Tell how you'll analyze the data.

Another approach is pretty similar: start writing the paper that you'd normally write at the end of your research. When you come to any part that you don't know or don't understand, just do as well as you can and keep going.

This feels very strange at first. Here's how it works. By writing, you stimulate your thinking. In order to make progress on your project, you need to think about it — and writing is an efficient way of making this happen. Even after you've finished writing for the day, your unconscious mind will be working away at the topic, trying to address the matters you expressed.

Of course it's quite possible to think about your topic without writing about it. Writing is just a reliable way of sustaining and focusing the thinking process. How many people schedule 15 minutes per day of concentrated thinking about a topic? If you've tried it, you'll know it's not easy to sustain.

Unconscious mental processing — during the time you're not writing — is one thing that makes daily writing more efficient than bingeing. When you do a long stint of writing, you're attempting to do all the thinking in one burst. This intensive effort can be exciting, but despite appearances it's not as productive as harnessing the mind over longer periods. The brain is like a muscle; it responds best to sustained, incremental training.

There's another, more practical reason why writing first — before doing all the research — is more efficient than writing only at the end. Let's say there are ten major books in the area you want to write about. The normal approach is to read them first, and probably you'll want to read even more books and articles just to be sure you understand the topic.

When you write first, before doing all the reading, you find out exactly what you need to know. You find gaps in your argument, points where you need examples, and places where you need a reference. So when you turn to the ten books, you don't need to read them in full. You know exactly what you're looking for, so you can just check the relevant bits.

Does this mean you learn less? Not at all. When you read a book or article with a purpose, you're much more likely to be able to remember crucial information because it fits within a framework you've developed.

Conclusion

Regular writing is a powerful tool, but for many it is extremely challenging. The temptations of procrastination are powerful. Therefore, rather than relying on willpower every day, the key is to establish conditions in your life that help develop and maintain a habit. These include finding a dedicated place and time for writing, keeping tallies of minutes spent writing, and reporting to a mentor. The task of undertaking writing sessions that are brief and regular helps reduce psychological resistance to starting, which is often the greatest barrier. Putting these steps into place can make it far easier to establish and maintain a habit that leads to high productivity.

However, only a few writers find themselves in the fortunate position of being encouraged and supported to make these sorts of arrangements. The wider social circumstances are not particularly supportive — indeed, they are at the foundation of bingeing behavior. Boice says that established writers and editors are actually unsympathetic, as they think people who aren't publishing don't have anything to say. He quotes one editor as saying, concerning a writing program, "Why bother? Too much is already being written and good writers don't need help." (Boice, 1990, p. 126). This sort of view, which Boice calls "elitist," assumes that writers are born, not made.

The Boice-Gray program challenges this sort of elitist attitude. It is based on the assumption that with the right conditions, just about anyone who wants to become a much better writer can do so. The program is also a challenge to every academic — you can do better too.

References

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