

Becoming a Writer

Many academics do not think of themselves as writers. Instead, they think of themselves as teachers, thinkers, scholars, researchers or artists who must write. This mindset creates obstacles to writing. Tietze (2014) argues that when writing becomes part of your identity, you make it a priority and create opportunities to write during your regular activities, just as you make room for other critical activities (sleeping, eating, spending time with your family, exercising).

If we reflect on how academics spend their time every day, writing emerges as an integral part of academic life. How much time do you spend writing emails, lecture notes, exam questions, comments on student papers and other day-to-day academic tasks? Writing is intrinsic to academic life. The type of writing that we parcel out as unique and separate from “real” academic life is the writing that is most useful for formal professional scholarship: peer-reviewed publications, conference submissions, grant proposals, chapters and books. When we isolate writing for publication as a unique activity that is fundamentally different from our other writing, we underestimate the role of writing as part of our professional identity and sabotage our commitment to writing publishable work.

Jenkins (2015) offers good advice for integrating writing into a regular schedule. Like Tietze, Jenkins argues that the first step to becoming a productive writer requires making a commitment to write: Decide that you *are* a writer and that writing is something you need to do to meet your personal goals (not imposed goals), not something you would like to do when the stars align properly.

The stars never align properly. Life never opens up a grand vista of leisure to enable completing long-postponed plans. Worse, mundane tasks have the uncanny knack of filling up the available time. If you have all afternoon to perfect your lecture and no other pressing priorities, you will use the full afternoon for this task. Jenkins suggests scheduling time for these routine tasks to prevent them from taking all your time. Although your PowerPoint might be more perfect if you spent another hour searching for better images, you might better spend some of that time on the important task of writing. Similarly, you should schedule times to write (and honor that schedule the way you would honor your class schedule or a committee meeting).

Consider the value of everyday writing for your more formal, scholarly work. You might write an email to a collaborator or editor to discuss the structure of an article or chapter. Treat this writing as pre-writing. It may contain the seeds of an outline or a paragraph that sorts out the main issues of a thorny topic. Notes recorded during a planning meeting may evolve into a first draft of a research methods section. Carry a notebook or iPad to record writing ideas or draft short summaries of concepts that might be the basis for new scholarly work or contribute to

existing work. Some people keep a reading journal and record new and useful ideas from scholarly reading. Others keep more general journals and record notes and to-do lists associated with day-to-day activities (meetings, conversations and phone calls, as well as formal reading). My notebooks contain highlighted comments about suggestions for teaching tips that surface during conversations and meetings with faculty.

Resources

Jenkins, R. (January 12, 2015). *Writing with a heavy teaching load*. Blog post in The Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Writing-With-a-Heavy-Teaching/151155>

Tietze, C. (July 3, 2014). *Make writing a part of your identify*. Blog post. Retrieved from <http://christiantietze.de/posts/2014/07/identity-schedule-serious-writing/>

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