



## University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center

### Advice for Reluctant Writers

Inspired by *The Scientist's Guide to Writing* by Stephen B. Heard

#### It's Good to Be Clear!

Academic writing *should* be easily understood by your reader—not just readers already immersed in your specialty but educated, interested readers who aren't experts in your field.

- Stephen King in *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* insists that writing is telepathy, implying that your reader should understand your thoughts so effortlessly that it's as though you had directly transferred them from your brain. The world depends on this sort of writing to help push our collective knowledge forward.
- A long-time Graduate Writing Center consultant in the sciences explains what she is working on to her six-year-old daughter. If she can make a concept or process accessible to a six-year-old, she reasons, she understands that concept or process well enough to converse with other audiences, including expert audiences.
- Check out the "Explain It to Me" handout in the Resources for Graduate Writers section of the Graduate Writing Center's website for approaches to talking/writing about complexity with clarity.

#### Writing is a Craft. Craftspeople Improve with Practice.

While some people appear to be writing geniuses, seemingly spinning out ready-for-publication works in their sleep, most find writing challenging.

- That means the writers you admire probably spend hours composing and revising—and that if they can do it, so can you.
- See the "Taking Stock of *Your* Writing Process" handout to better understand the writing practices and process that work best for you and help you practice and hone this craft.

#### Turn Bad Habits into Good Habits.

As you think about not just what you are writing but also how you write, reflect too on behaviors that keep you from writing or excuses you make not to write—and challenge yourself to imagine how you can turn that bad habit into a good habit.

- If you tell yourself, "I can't write until this article on X," turn that excuse into a reward: "I can give writing 30 minutes, and then I'll be ready to see what 'article on X' can contribute"—your reward.
- See the "Writing Productivity Tips" handout for more ways to turn writing challenges into opportunities and to rebut your most common excuses.

### **Read Like a Writer.**

The next time you read something in your field that you find compelling, persuasive, wonderfully clear, elegantly written—whatever it is that wows you about the writing—turn that piece of writing into your writing teacher.

- Make specific observations about what you like and admire about this piece of writing. If someone described a concept perfectly, think about how they managed that.
- Check out the “Learning from a Mentor Text” handout for more ways to draw useful lessons from model “mentor” texts in your field.

### **Just Start**

When it comes to beginning a new draft, we can find a number of reasons to...well...not. We may be procrastinating, when we know we should start but find other activities that keep us from doing so. Or we may be procrastinating by telling ourselves “I don’t have all the data. I just need to wait for the perfect opening hook.” Whatever the reason, find a way to get yourself to put words on a page.

- Hide all sources of distraction, or change your environment so that writing is only option. (Try a Graduate Writing Center Sunday Writing Retreat!).
- If you feel like you don’t have enough to say yet, recognize that it is still helpful to get half-baked thoughts on a page so that you have a starting point later.
- Or write pieces that you do have all the information for (methods sections lend themselves nicely to this), that way when you have all the data, you will already have a head start on your final product.
- See the “Brainstorming and Drafting” folder on the Graduate Writing Center’s Resource page for ways to just start writing—and start feeling better because you’ve done so!

### **Don’t Let Perfection Get in the Way of Good Enough**

If you are prone to perfectionism, remember that you can always revise. It is often better to keep going forward with a thought than agonizing over perfecting details as you go.

- The Graduate Writing Center’s “Revising and Editing” folder offers strategies for revisiting what writer Annie Lamott calls “shitty first drafts” and transforming raw, messy, overbaked, or underbaked writing into writing ready to go into the world.

### **Keep It Up!**

Ok, great, you’ve started your paper. How do you keep up momentum? Writing, as with any craft, does require a significant amount of discipline.

- Learn to set achievable goals (such as daily word or time goals).
- Schedule dedicated writing time. These don’t have to be large chunks of time. Dedicating a half hour to writing every day or making sure you protect three days a week for your writing will get you farther faster than a single eight-hour “binge-writing” session.
- Finally, don’t get discouraged and remember that writing takes practice.