



University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center Taking Stock of *Your* Writing Process

The first, and perhaps only, rule of productive writing is DO WHAT WORKS. But how do you know what works for you and how to cultivate a writing routine that supports how you work as a writer? Use this guide, adapted from the Penn State Graduate Writing Center, to become a writing-process and work-habits detective!

WHERE: What is your typical work space like?

- Surfaces: What are you sitting on? What are you writing on?
- Noise: How loud or quiet is it around you?
- Temperature: Hot or cold?
- Light: How well-lit is the space?
- Fuel: Do you have access to food, water?

General rules for where you work:

- Be comfortable, but not too comfortable
- Be willing and able to visit your writing space regularly.
- Don't use your writing space for recreation.
- If you're having trouble, try changing something up.

WHEN: What is your writing time like?

- What time of day do you tend to write?
- For how long do you write?
- How many "writing sessions" do you have in a day?
- How long does it take you to get started?
- What happens in your day before you write? What happens after?

General Rules for when you work

- Establish a routine. Write at the same time each day or same schedule each week.
- Don't try to write all day. Discreet writing periods are best (~2-3 hours per session).
- Find the time of day when you are most productive and reserve it for writing.
- Writing is a marathon; gradual progress the goal. Even 15 minutes a day will help.
- Just as you wouldn't schedule a meeting when you are supposed to be teaching, don't schedule a meeting when you had planned to be writing!

HOW: What methods do you use to begin?

- Do you outline?
- Do you create a separate document for data/quotes/referenced material?
- Where (with what section) do you start?

General Rules for how you work:

- Set reasonable goals. Succeeding at writing 2 pages is better than failing to write 10.
- Think of writing as a 9-5 job. You want to show up because there's a job to be done.
- Use the below strategies to further help you work smart.

Brainstorming and Drafting

- Outlining: use numbered lists to create a writing plan. Fill out the outline as much as you can. Or create a reverse outline (see the handout in this binder) of a draft-in-progress to see how a draft is working and what's needed now.
- Templating: use a mentor text from your field as a paragraph-by-paragraph guide to help you get started and organize your research story or scholarly discussion. But use discernment: You may find an additional limitation or complication that needs to be introduced; a different needed signpost or stance-taking phrase etc.!
- Free writing: forcing yourself to write, and to shut off any critical voices in your head. (The "Explain It to Me" and other exercises at the start of this binder give some helpful approaches to more "guided" freewriting.)

Organizing

- Break your project into parts: dissertations become chapters, which become sections, which become sub-sections, which become paragraphs.
- If you are hung up on one of those parts, pick a different one to work on.
- If the parts don't seem to fit together, move them around or add transition sections.
- Start with a quote, a piece of data, something concrete. Build from there.

Concentrating

- Don't let an "inner critic" criticize your writing before you even have a word on the page. Imagine sending your inner critic packing—not permitted to come back until a *specific time* when you want to look at your writing with an eye for what does and doesn't work.
- Close your email browser, and silence your phone. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that if you just answer some emails first, you'll then have "cleared the decks" for writing.
- Try to Pomodoro Technique (Google to learn more): Set a timer for 25 minutes and spend that 25 minutes *writing* (brainstorming, drafting, revising, or editing). For that 25 minutes, *don't* check a citation, look up an article, venture over to Facebook. At the end of 25 minutes, give yourself a five-minute break, then reset the timer for 25 minutes more. At the end of a second or third 25-minute round, you might want to call it a day or give yourself a longer break to stretch your legs or make some tea. The key is to tell yourself: *I only have to write for these next 25 minutes* and then you can decide if you'd like to go another round!
- End a writing session by writing a memo to yourself: Where did you leave off, where do you want to begin and what do you want to accomplish the next time you write?

Other People

- Join or form a writing group: ask your peers to share their writing with you, and yours with them. Meet regularly—whether to "workshop" drafts or for quiet, companionable writing time—and hold each other accountable.
- Talk to anyone who will listen. The more you talk about (and through) your topic, the more you will understand it too and be primed for writing.

- Talk through your ideas for the next section, either to a tape recorder or to a friend, family member, or graduate writing consultant. If you are talking to someone, ask them to repeat back what you said and point out where they want you to say more.

The Bigger Picture

- Write your longer-term goals—*Full draft to committee by 9/20, Defend 10/15*—and post them where you typically write. When someone asks if you can do something—help plan a new course, attend a family event—ask yourself, “Will saying *yes* help me with these goals? Will saying *yes* inhibit me from meeting these goals?”