

Monday, June 5, 2017

## Writing Rocks

Dear Joyce,

During the summer months, I receive lots of questions about when to write, how to organize an unstructured day, and how to [maneuver around your resistance](#) -- now that you understand it better! -- on a daily basis. These are great questions! In this Monday Motivator, I'll describe my own personal system in hopes that it will give you some ideas to model, adapt, experiment with, and improve upon as you answer these important questions for yourself.

My approach to writing has always been guided by a search for empirically-documented best practices and a spirit of experimentation. This comes from the fact that I'm a social scientist by training and a skeptical person by nature. In other words, I'm only willing to try writing skills and strategies that have been empirically-tested and repeatedly found to be effective for most people, under most circumstances. That said, I constantly find myself taking strategies that generally work for most people and putting my own spin on them so they will work for me.

For example, I learned early on in my career that daily writing, using a timer, and alternating periods of writing and rest are the keys to developing a consistent, sustainable writing practice and to increasing research productivity. But no matter what results other people get, I only believe what works for me. I just adapt what I learn with my own flavor. Over the years, I've taken those core skills and developed my own personal way of using them that is designed to address my particular forms of [resistance](#). I'm going to describe it to you to encourage you to experiment with best practices, illustrate how to take your own unique form of resistance into consideration, and validate those of you who like to customize the skills and strategies you learn here at the NCFDD to what works for you.

I call my system **Writing Rocks**. It's quite simple -- there are three types of writing rocks in my system: pebbles, stones, and boulders. Those terms are really just symbolic ways that I think about my writing time. The pebbles are 15-minute blocks of writing time, the stones are larger 30-minute blocks, and a boulder is a whopping 45-minutes of uninterrupted writing time. Let me describe each in a little more detail so you can understand how they relate to my resistance.

### **Pebbles**

Pebbles are designed to address my primary level of resistance. I don't know about you, but every morning when my writing time rolls around, I just don't wanna write! I would rather do anything -- check email, fold laundry, etc. -- than write. That's because my biggest problem with writing has always been getting started. Once I get started and get into the writing, I'm just fine. I sometimes even lose track of time! So for me, the challenge is all about getting my [bodyguard](#) to relax so I can get my butt in the chair and fingers on the keyboard. What I do is

strike a deal with the big guy. I say, *I'm only going to write for 15 minutes*. For whatever reason, this feels like such a tiny amount of time that it eases any fear and anxiety. What could happen in 15 minutes? To get started, I set my timer, drop down into my writing, and keep going until the timer goes off. And every day, I'm freshly shocked and delighted by how much work I can get done in 15 minutes. It also helps that I typically plan easy, concrete, and discrete tasks for my first pebble of the day. When the timer goes off, I stop immediately and give myself a 5-minute break. And here's the key: I set my timer for the break! I know it sounds odd, but my resistance can flare up during the breaks in the form of procrastination and avoidance. The timer going off tells me the break is over, and it's time to get back to work.

## Stones

Once I'm warmed up, I move into a longer block of writing. I call these stones, and for me, they are 30 minutes of concentrated writing, followed by a 10-minute break at the end. On most days, it's this second block of time where I get into the more intense thinking and writing work. For me, it's best if I have a **SMART** goal (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**tttractive, **R**ealistic, and **T**ime-Framed) for that time block. An example would be: I will draft three ugly paragraphs of my introduction by 10:00 am.

Now, I know my resistance quite well, and once I have the nerve to start a longer block of writing, my bodyguard ramps up into high gear. He will throw anything and everything at me in rapid succession, each of which is designed to take me away (physically or mentally) from the writing task at hand. For example:

- I'm hungry.
- I'm thirsty.
- I have to pee.
- I'm cold/hot.
- I have to track down that citation right now!
- This isn't the right music for the mood. Let's go to iTunes and look for something more appropriate.
- Maybe I should email \_\_\_\_\_ to get some additional clarity on this issue.
- Here's a great idea for a completely different paper! Maybe I should write on that now instead of this boring piece in front of me.
- Maybe I should stop and go read the latest news/research on \_\_\_\_\_ before I waste time writing.

Sound familiar? I keep a pad of paper next to my keyboard and simply write down each diversionary thought as it occurs. If it's truly important, I can act on it after the 30-minute block is complete. As you can imagine, once I'm done with my writing and it's time for a break, most of those seemingly urgent needs no longer feel pressing. Again, I reset the timer for my break, and I can do whatever I want until it goes off again.

## Boulders

Every once in a while, I drop a 45-minute boulder (followed by a 15-minute break) into my writing routine. It's rare for several reasons: 1) big blocks of writing time activate the greatest resistance for me, 2) long writing times make me cranky, and 3) my busy schedule rarely allows for big chunks of time to write. That said, I do occasionally have a lot to accomplish in the face of an immediate deadline, a task that could be completed in one slightly longer writing period, or extra time in my week that can accommodate a big block of writing time.

One thing I know for sure is that boulders have a way of bringing out my inner-critic. For me, longer periods of time activate a qualitatively different kind of [resistance](#) than I experience in shorter periods. It's uglier, it's more below-the-belt, and it's typically aimed at undermining my confidence and self-worth. In other words, when my [inner-critic](#) sees a boulder in my schedule, she slams a Red Bull and comes out swinging fast and furious: *Who do you think you are? Nobody is going to publish this crap, so why bother? And even if you can fool someone into publishing it, do you really want everyone who reads it to realize how stupid and silly you are?*

Ugh! Because of my [inner critic's](#) drama, I know that the only way I'll get through a boulder is to have another human being waiting on the other side. Whether it's a call from my writing buddy, checking in with a coach, or a mid-day group chat with my [Faculty Success Program](#) crew, I won't make it through a concentrated 45 minutes unless I can run screaming into the presence of someone else at the end of that writing time. For me, it's both an accountability mechanism *and* a lifeline. Whoever I'm talking to knows to ask me how my writing went, which also motivates me to give a positive report. In fact, when I finish a boulder, I call myself a "rock star!" With all of these requirements, you can understand why I often prefer to shoot for a pebble and a stone rather than to head straight into a giant boulder that will trigger greater and uglier forms of resistance as well as require more organized external accountability.

Needless to say, the whole reason I enjoy the image of various sizes of writing rocks is because I understand writing as a slow, long, and gradual process. I'm currently working on a book manuscript, and it takes lots of time and sustained effort to complete a draft. And I want to feel good about completing *each step of the process*, not just the end product. Imagining my daily time as writing rocks provides me with a visual image that each day matters, each day I take an important step forward, and each 15-, 30- or 45-minute writing rock contributes in a concrete way to the cumulative end product.

The thing I love most about my **Writing Rocks** is that they help me understand my time differently. Getting accustomed to writing in small blocks means that I feel empowered to block 60 minutes out of each day knowing that I can get a lot done. I also enjoy the flexibility it gives me to choose how I will spend my 60 minutes based on how I'm feeling on any given day; maybe it will be a pebble and a stone, or maybe I'll go straight in for a boulder.

And finally, having varying sizes of writing blocks means I can write *anytime* I have even as little as 15 minutes. In fact, I finished drafting this Monday Motivator while I was sitting in a waiting room! How? My esthetician was running 10 minutes late, and I arrived 5 minutes early:  $10 + 5 = 15$  unexpected minutes in my life. That was just enough time to write a little

pebble instead of staring out the window, eating or drinking something just to keep myself busy, or mindlessly checking Facebook with my phone. Isn't that great! With writing rocks, an annoyance turns into an opportunity!

I frequently hear that the specificity and detail that we provide in our NCFDD materials are helpful to imagining what might work for YOU! I've described my **Writing Rocks** as a way to stimulate your thinking, so now it's time to ask yourself: *What is my current writing process? Is it working for me? Do I have realistic expectations? Have I tried short bursts of writing, or do I assume that writing requires long and agonizing hours at a time in front of the computer?*

## The Weekly Challenge

This week, I challenge you to:

- Write every day for at least 30 minutes (in whatever configuration of pebbles, stones, and boulders suit your fancy).
- Ask yourself: What is the relationship between the length of my writing time and my resistance?
- If you don't know the answer, try tracking your resistance and your writing time this week.
- Once you observe your own patterns of resistance, try experimenting with different blocks of writing time and accountability mechanisms to see what works for you.

I hope this week brings each of you a spirit of experimentation, a sense of curiosity about your own patterns, and tremendous creativity in adapting your daily writing to your own unique needs.

Peace & Productivity,



Kerry Ann Rockquemore, PhD  
President, National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity



P.S. We are building a brand new mentoring platform that will launch in July! Here's a sneak peek at the new site, and if you're interested in helping us as a beta-tester, [click here](#).