10 Ways to Make Sure Your Writing Happens

Christine Tulley gives advice for how to use a weekly writing day productively.

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Across a growing body of faculty productivity scholarship, researchers tend to prescribe one of two avenues for writing success. Many advocate for the gold standard of an hour a day (https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/gradhacker/how-develop-strategic-writing-plan), endorsed by Robert Boice, or small segments (https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2019/12/05/how-write-more-regularly-and-publish-more-often-despite-having-heavy-teaching-load) to work within the confines of a heavy teaching schedule. My own research on highly productive writing faculty supports this latter view of working -- writing faculty toggle in and out of projects all day and write in extremely short bursts. What both strategies have in common is frequent and daily contact with writing.

Yet in workshop after workshop I run, faculty repeatedly ask about how to use a weekly writing day productively. Despite the hype about daily writing, I've found scores of faculty who reserve Fridays solely for writing projects and others who reserve Tuesdays and Thursdays for writing projects around teaching. They only write one or two days a week. Research has not supported this as a way of writing successfully -- researchers, including Boice (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0741088397014004001), note high levels of burnout, distraction or slow progress when faculty work on writing for long periods (i.e., binge writing) infrequently. Faculty may get some writing done, but many procrastinate or get distracted, or dread sitting that long. In fact, one recent study (https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2019/03/07/6-insights-into-being-a-productive-and-happy-academic-author/) of nearly 600 faculty writers found that academics who wrote during sabbaticals and breaks were the least satisfied of all faculty writers.

What's interesting is that longer stretches (writing days, sabbaticals, summers, semester breaks and even writing retreats) frequently are presented on campus as opportunities to get *more* writing done. With all that open time, the logic goes, faculty should have time to complete projects. This cultural mind-set may explain why faculty I coach are most interested in strategies for writing days versus daily writing. Other faculty with stacked teaching schedules and long commutes note that even shorter daily writing times are difficult to find and they must write in less frequent blocks. After working with these faculty, I've identified some techniques that provide safeguards against typical issues that derail productivity.

Prior to the writing day:

- **Identify a beginning and an end of the writing time for the writing day.** Block the time

on your calendar. When does your writing day officially start and stop? In theory, a writing day is not a shopping day or a take-the-car-into-the-shop day, but it's tempting to use the "day off" from teaching and meetings for these activities. Better to set the actual time frame of the writing day, say, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. The other hours are then open for errands that are tough to do on teaching days and on days with long commutes.

- **Briefly revisit a writing day project at least two other times during the week for five or 10 minutes.** Slot these "visiting" sessions on your calendar. During these brief contact points, remind yourself of the big picture. Re-outline the article or review the table of contents for a book project to keep the big picture in mind. Tara Gray, author of *Publish Not Perish* (http://www.dissertationdoctor.com/articles/TaraGray.pdf), advocates writing a "thesis on the wall" -- a sentence that summarizes your argument. Write a thesis on the wall and fine-tune it during a brief contact session. A third option is to have coffee with a colleague and talk about what you worked on to get feedback from a real audience. These sessions will help stave off forgetting about your writing.

- **Map your writing day the night before.** Carve up the writing day into chunks. What are you working on and when? Different chunks could be devoted to different projects or aspects of a single larger project. Tackling big problems first (after an "ease in" period, see below) is useful. For example, I recently dedicated part of a writing day to spending two hours rethinking how to combine an introduction and a chapter one. I read through both chapters, highlighting what I wanted to keep from each, asked myself about the purpose of the combined introduction and started moving the highlights together in a new document in a slow and deliberate manner. This was difficult, brain-tasking work, but it moved the project forward rapidly once I devoted the longer time period to it.

On your writing day:

- **Ease into the writing.** Even with two touch points during the week, I've found that a 15- to 30-minute "ease in" period is essential to having a productive writing day. During this time I review my map for the writing day and read my notes from last time (see more about "closing" the project, below). I also spend two to three minutes reminding myself why I am excited about this project. What are findings I want to share with someone and who might care about these? This renewed focus on what the writing will contribute is often enough to get started. To make sure I make new progress, I set my phone timer for 15 or 30 minutes.

- **Remember not writing *is* sometimes writing.** When I do a writing day, I usually take a

break every hour and half and walk around the library or go outside for 10 or 20 minutes. While these breaks are ostensibly for stretching or grabbing a snack, I use them to think about what I just worked on, where problems are that need to be dealt with, etc. When I return, I add these thoughts to my map for the day.

- **Read and write at the same time.** On writing days, I often find I need to cite research or reread part of something I cited. I set my phone timer for 15 minutes to power read for the reason I need that source, and when the time is up, I immediately take what I've read and start working it into the written draft. Joli Jenson notes many faculty fall down the wormhole of reading "just one more source (https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1777-the-myth-of-one-more-source)" on the writing day. I don't take the approach that reading isn't writing, because sometimes, you really do need to understand that theory or double-check the wording for a quotation, but a time limit helps keep the purpose of the reading clear and limited.

- **Save busy work for the end.** In *How Writing Faculty Write* (https://upcolorado.com/utah-state-university-press/item/3361-how-writing-faculty-write), Chris Anson describes a system of "semi-drafting" where he leaves brackets with notes to himself within the writing to deal with later. I frequently mark CITE where I know I need to add research support or CHECK NAME if I am not sure about a spelling. During the last hour of a writing day, I knock out as many of these tasks as I can. I also spell-check during this time and look at sentence beginnings to aim for variety. If there are words or phrases repeated too frequently, I look for synonyms or lexical transitions.

- **"Close" the project.** During the last 20 minutes of the writing day, I use notes from my map to make a map for the next writing session. I also use this time to update my master scholarship chart (https://www.scribd.com/document/419481309/Sample-Scholarship-Tracking-Christine-Tulley), save all documents and email files to myself with the subject line "Backup" and the current date. Once a month, I copy files over to Google Drive. This systematic backup helps me remember where to find the most recent version of a file.

Developing your writing day (and writing year) system:

- **Find a way to "click in" to your writing on your writing day.** I gave an interview (https://podcasts.google.com/?feed=aHR0cDovL3JoZXRvcmljaXR5LmxpYnN5bi5jb20vcnNz&episode=YzE2MWM0NzdlMTRjNGI5MDkzNTMxMDFmNThjN2IxZDc&hl=en&ved=2ahUKEwjKsJPT3avmAhURXa0KHQ1GAWQQieUEegQICBAI&ep=6&at=1576003263753) about my own writing process where I describe how I "click in" by picking up a good cup of coffee, heading straight to the library and finding a writing space. My brain now thinks, "Coffee, library, now write." Much has been written about similar writing rituals

(https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674737709) . A writing day ritual would be even more valuable here, as it would refamiliarize you with how the process works after a six-day hiatus in between sessions.

- Systematize where writing projects are tracked and recorded. I've written previously (https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2018/07/11/benefits-developing-master-writing-plan-over-summer-opinion) in *Inside Higher Ed* about the master chart I keep to track all of my writing projects. With more time between writing sessions, it's easy to miss a deadline or understand where you are on two different projects if you worked on both a week ago. Keeping weekly maps for the writing sessions as well as a project management chart keeps all of the pieces front and center and lets you see progress from week to week.

Helen Sword, another writing productivity researcher, recently debunked (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1360144X.2016.1210153?scroll=top&needAccess=true) the myth of the "writing every day" mantra, noting that real-life academics "carve out time and space for writing in an impressive variety of ways." If a writing day is a habit you want to keep, consider the above strategies to fine-tune your writing productivity.

Christine Tulley is a professor of English, director of the master of arts in rhetoric and writing program, and academic career development coordinator at the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Findlay. She is the author of How Writing Faculty Write (https://www.amazon.com/How-Writing-Faculty-Write-Productivity/dp/1607326612/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1548443480&sr=8-1&keywords=how+writing+faculty+write) *(Utah State University Press, 2018).*

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