

# FINDING SPACE, TIME AND ENERGY

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In academic writing, the stakes are high (professional success) and the feedback is low. The overall goal of the TU Faculty Writing Program is to counteract the debilitating effects of our high stakes/low feedback academic culture. We offer techniques and support to help your academic writing become both less stressful and more rewarding.

Productive academic writing requires learning how to protect your time, space and energy. The material gathered in this packet will help you identify, analyze and then deploy ways to create the time, space and energy you need to maintain lower stress/higher reward academic writing.

This is the third of three packets prepared for the TU Faculty Writing Program. The first packet addresses “Myths We Stall By,” describing the beliefs and assumptions we use to keep ourselves from completing long projects. The second addresses “Becoming a Public Scholar” and offers techniques and suggestions for making our academic work available to a wider audience. All three packets are available in The Garret (McFarlin 5100) along with other useful books and articles about academic writing.

## **Protecting Time**

Teaching and service place seemingly inescapable demands on us during the semester. This means we put our writing on the back burner, or on one or two days a week, until a summer or research leave or sabbatical. Then, with supposedly “plenty of time to write,” we still have seemingly inescapable demands—family, friends, home repair, travel, preparatory reading, additional research, etc. We feel the time slip away, and then go on all-day writing binges to try to catch up because we feel so far behind. And then our summer/leave/sabbatical is over and we are back to trying to fit in writing, feeling shame over having once again wasted a precious opportunity for “real writing.”

This pattern is widespread; it is also totally counterproductive. All the research on academic productivity says essentially the same thing—we need to have daily, predictable, low-stress writing sessions in order to complete academic writing projects. We are deluding ourselves when we put off writing until we “really have time.” We will never find the time to write. Instead, we need to make time, every day.

A first step toward this is keeping a reverse day planner. This is simply a record of where our time currently goes—every hour accounted for accurately, without judgment. Doing this for at least a week usually proves what we already know—that we are overcommitted. But it also reveals patterns and possibilities. I was stunned to discover that I spend several hours a day answering email, usually in the mornings—my ideal writing time. I also saw how many voluntary commitments had crept into my life without my noticing—and where I could cut back to give myself a few hours a day to write.

Once you’ve identified where your time is actually going, you can explore various options for scheduling regular, daily writing sessions. As we will discuss in the “energy” section, it is important to choose hours when you are most alert, and then limit your writing sessions to a manageable amount of time. Remember, no matter how much writing you have to do, the research shows that writing output is better supported by short daily sessions, rather than intermittent long ones.

Scheduling 1-3 hour writing sessions every day, at the same time each day, will yield amazing productivity. You will find that you no longer need to dread or avoid or “find a big block of time.” You will know, each day, when and where you will be writing. You will also know when you will be free to enjoy all the other things that your day can include.

Eviatar Zerubavel’s classic book *The Clockwork Muse* is full of good advice about how and why to deploy a regular writing schedule. But he is also pretty compulsive about his system. I think similar results can come simply from securing a brief block of time for your writing, every day. Start small if you like—1/2 hour for a week, then move up to what seems to be your best session length. An ideal writing session allows you to get in “flow” but is not so long that you are drained. As I discuss in the Energy section, quit while you still have some juice, and make a note of where to begin tomorrow. With a daily, brief, predictable session system, tomorrow always has time for writing, too. You don’t ever again have to “find time to write”—with a pre-determined daily schedule, writing time is always there for you, ready and waiting.

During the summer and on research leaves, your commitment can be 90 for 90—scheduling 90 minute writing sessions for 90 consecutive days. You will be amazed at how much writing you can get done in just an hour and a half, every day. A predictable writing schedule vanquishes the anxiety we feel when we procrastinate, deflect, or go on writing binges. It frees us to enjoy brief, manageable and productive daily writing; it also frees us to enjoy the rest of our lives guilt-free. Try it. It really works. *Question: Can you commit to using a reverse day planner for a week, then finding 90 minutes a day to write, for 90 days in a row?*

## Dedicating Space

Stephen King says it succinctly—all you really need to get writing done is “a door that closes.” So the main requirement for a writing space is that it gives you protection from interruptions—both self-generated and other-generated. In other words, your writing space need not be large, or beautiful, or even well-organized. But it does need to be set apart. So give yourself a dedicated space that is only for writing. And then do whatever you must do to ensure that you don’t distract yourself, or let others distract you.

*Question: Do you have a dedicated writing space with “a door that closes?” If so, how can you improve it? If not, how can you create it? Could you use TU’s FWP writing carrels or the 3rd floor faculty study?*

Once you’ve established your closed-door space, here are some additional space-related suggestions that might prove helpful.

**Live vs. Dead Projects:** Home and office writings spaces tend to become cluttered and stale. Make sure your writing space is focused on a single live project. Store any waiting, completed or moribund projects in labeled cardboard boxes elsewhere.

**Visible Organization System:** Find a way to display your project so that you can easily move from “trees” to “forest” or from specific section to general structure. Some options for this include:

**Project Box:** I use an inexpensive portable file box to hold outlines as well as files for each chapter, along with contacts and references and the crucial “ventilation file”—see below.

**Ironing Board:** When organizing material into section of chapters, I like to set up an ironing board to arrange various chunks. This lets me play around with related portions before I actually write them each out.

**Wall Outline:** Some people use a white board or similar system to outline portions of a larger project—erasing and reorganizing as needed.

**Consecutive Clipboards:** The prolific Lewis Mumford used nails and clipboards to organize his many sections and projects—he would rearrange their order and contents often.

**Inviting Design:** Some people advise making your writings space as lovely as possible, so that you will eagerly enter it every day. If you think that flowers or pictures or tea will lower your writing stress and increase your writing reward, feel free to enhance your space with design details. But be forewarned—I’ve met many people with gorgeous writing spaces they never ever use.

*Question: Once you have a “door that closes,” how can you create a welcoming writing space that involves only live projects, flexibly organized?*

## **Sustaining Energy**

Writing, even in small, manageable sessions, in an inviting space, with a door that closes, is exhausting. It is important to respect this, and to learn to work with your daily energy fluctuations. Many of us succeeded in college and graduate school by binge studying and binge writing. We think of ourselves as academic warriors who can always “power through” when it’s crunch time.

But reliable scholarly productivity involves a different attitude toward our work. Rather than our writing being something we conquer or survive, our writing can become a daily commitment for a rested and responsive self. We need to learn to honor and show up for our writing every day, as best we can. In other words, when it comes to scholarly work, we need to become more like gardeners and less like warriors.

So we need to make a real commitment to get enough sleep, eat right, exercise and detach from energy drains—including departmental politics, regrets about the past, and worries about the future.

Beyond these basics, here are some additional energy-sustaining techniques:

**Harness Biorhythms:** Since academic writing is so crucial to our professional success, it makes sense to give it our “best energies.” Most of us vary in our alertness across our waking hours. Figure out when you are at your most creative, and schedule your writing sessions for those times. Leave email and grading and student conferences for lower energy hours.

**A, B and C Times:** Zerubavel suggests that we identify our energies AND our projects by A, B and C, then match A projects to A times, and so forth. In other words, when you are facing deadlines for several projects, arrange to devote your best energy to the most important project. I often do the reverse—I imagine I can “clear the decks” so I find myself devoting A energy to C projects, just to get them out of the way. This leaves me drained and resentful when I finally get around to my A project.

**End with Juice:** Learn how to finish each of your writing sessions while you feel there is still more to say. You can do this either by scheduling briefer writing sessions, or by ending before you feel finished. Never write to exhaustion—instead, write toward a controlled closure. You should feel pleasantly tired and fulfilled, not drained and miserable, at the end of your writing time.

**Link Your Writing Sessions:** As you end a writing session, make notes for where you want to begin the next day. This is a way to contain and continue your writing energy. It makes it easy to end with juice, and begin with focus and direction. And it helps you unconsciously “pre-write” during the rest of your day.

**Keep Two Lists:** As you are writing, you will distract yourself by thinking of both additional writing-related tasks, and additional life-related tasks. Keep two different lists handy, and quickly jot down what has come to mind. Then get back to your writing project. Your writing-related list can be done during “C” time, since it usually involves references or background research; your life-related list can be done as soon as your writing session is over, since it usually involves laundry or groceries or the like.

**Differentiate Blocks from “Procedural Disturbances”:** If you find yourself resisting or avoiding your writing sessions, or being uncomfortable and unhappy during them, then it is important to explore what is really going on. Some advice books dismiss writer’s block as a self-indulgent myth; others see it as a real psychological phenomenon. An important first step is to figure out if you are deeply resisting writing, or if there are some easily fixed circumstances—like when and where you write—that for some reason now hinder you. Fix them first.

**Ventilation File:** Deep writing resistance is normal and recurs, but it need not stop you for long. One of the most useful techniques I’ve ever come across is the ventilation file, devoted solely to “venting” about all project-related issues. It is totally private, it can count as part of your daily writing session, and it is where you dump every negative, whiny, hostile, self-pitying, inappropriate and unprofessional thought you have about your project. Amazingly, this process of free-writing negative thoughts makes it possible to immediately—during the session!--return to the project more openly and creatively. It is the single most useful academic technique I have ever used.

**Visual Progress:** It is easy to feel like our academic writing is getting nowhere, so it is important to keep a visual progress record. Some people like to keep daily charts of word counts; others like to print out completed pages; others like to put a gold star on a calendar for each completed writing session. Find a system that works for you, and give yourself visible credit for daily accomplishments. Hokey as it sounds, this is a proven productivity enhancing technique, and worth trying.

### **Addendum: The Option of Writing Groups**

All of these time, space and energy techniques can benefit from the support of other academic writers. A faculty writing group can encourage you as you try various ways to protect your time, space and energy. Here are some guidelines for starting and maintaining a faculty writing group:

Stay intimate and accountable; an ideal size is 6-8 committed participants.

Make a real commitment; attend whether or not the weeks’ writing goals have been met.

Have regular meetings every week, in a neutral setting, rather than a home. Keep the focus on writing, not socializing.

Focus on process not critique; academic writing groups are about getting writing done, not about evaluating content or style. Find other colleagues, outside the group, to review and comment on your disciplinary content. Fiction-writing groups are usually about detailed and specific content critiques; academic writing groups should ignore content and focus instead on whatever it takes to get scholarly writing completed.

Follow a pre-determined structure. One suggestion is to have each participant spend no more than five minutes reporting on weekly writing progress (or lack thereof), with no interruptions. Advice can be offered at end of each report, lasting no more than five minutes. This keeps meetings effective and less than 90 minutes long.

Stay accountable: Have a group leader who reminds everyone of the next meeting, and writes down specific goals for each participant.

Individualize: Set your own realistic writing goals each week, and make sure they are right for you. You can measure by word count, hourly schedule, project benchmarks or a combination but make sure you make measurable goals, and report on what went right/wrong with them.

Develop and maintain trust: Everyone should commit to confidentiality—agree that “whatever is said in group stays in group”. It is also wise to keep tenured and tenure track faculty in separate writing groups, so that no one worries about the possible consequences of being fully honest about writing issues.

To summarize: The ideal academic writing group is relatively small, meets every week, and focuses on accountability and process. It helps participants design and deploy low stress/high reward academic writing practices. The attendance policy (showing up no matter what) helps participants create and sustain productive writing schedules.

I hope these tips offer useful options for enhancing your writing time, space and energy. Remember that the Faculty Writing Program’s lounge The Garret (5100 McFarlin) has books and other writing support resources. It can comfortably host a meeting of 6 people—larger groups could use the table and chairs in the 5th floor foyer. Coffee, tea and snacks are always available for FWP participants.

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**Recommended Reading** (available for checkout in The Garret)

Boice, Robert. *Professors as Writers: A Self-help Guide to Productive Writing*. Stillwater OK: New Forums Press, 1990.

Silvia, Paul J. *How to Write a Lot: A Guide to Productive Academic Writing*. American Psychological Association, 2007.

Zerubavel, Eviatar. *The Clockwork Muse: A Practical Guide to Writing Theses, Dissertations and Books*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.