

## Top 10 “Secret Writing Tips” to Boost Your Productivity: Part 1

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### Your Need to Write

Faculty at research institutions, in particular, have been required to write grants, journal articles, and books since dinosaurs in low-rise denims roamed the countryside trying to figure out the special effects in *Jurassic Park*. However, beyond that requirement, it seems everybody has to write, whether you are a faculty member, administrator, faculty developer, IT specialist, or any other professional in higher education or beyond. No one can escape. Writing-wise, it's: *“No Academician Left Behind.”*

People are talking less and typing on PCs/Macs, iPhones, iPads, and the latest iApple equipment on social media networks more than at any time previously. However, most professionals I know as well as friends, family, and neighborhood pets have problems writing. Most are *not* satisfied with either the quality or quantity of what they write, but there doesn't seem to be enough time to do it any differently. Many professors feel they can always produce more and do it better.

### *Another Article on Writing?*

If you Google “professional (or academic) writing,” you will find buckets of books, articles, online writing groups (academic and nonacademic), workshops, and other resources that can help you in your writing quest. Given your over-packed schedule, you may not have the time or inclination to dig up all of these materials and process them. That's where my article enters your life.

You're probably thinking, “Why do we need another article on top of this heap?” I don't have a clue. Actually, having worked with more than a dozen editors (actually, I drove them nuts) and five publishers, I can pass on a few tricks of the trade. Hopefully, I might be able to suggest a

new tidbit of advice that might elevate your writing to levels beyond your wildest imagination, or, maybe not. Further, this article is easily accessible, anonymous, high security, free, and occasionally funny. No one will ever know you peeked at it and most of the other Google sources are not that funny.

### *Purpose of This Article*

First, let's be clear on what this article does not cover. This is not a guide to journal or book publishing or a list of rules for the grammar and mechanics of writing. Fawgettaboutit. There are plenty of sources on those topics.

Instead, this article suggests 10 strategies to improve the quality and quantity of what you write professionally and also personally. It doesn't matter whether it's a research, theory, literature review, historical, commentary, or even murder mystery piece, OR an e-mail, blog, social media comment, listserv response, report, review or critique, article, chapter, or book. These are generic suggestions. However, if you just find one or two ideas from this article useful in your writing, it will have been a failure and total waste of my time. I'm shooting for three. Let me know my hit rate and any comments you might have.

### Top 10 Secret Tips

Are you ready for my top 10 suggestions? Isn't this exciting? Remember: This is a top secret, high security, Code Mango Tango classified document. Shhhh. Don't breathe a word of this to anyone. Here's a preview:

1. Write Everyday
2. Write Everywhere
3. Conquer Distractions and Interruptions
4. Write for a Niche
5. Write with a Purpose
6. Write with Passion
7. Write Drafts

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\* The author is extremely grateful to Susan Greene (writer/editor/curriculum developer at SG Wordplay) for her encouragement and reflective comments on an earlier draft of this article.

8. Adopt a Writing Mentor
9. Proofoffreed Thorowghly
10. Pick an Accountability Partner

Unfortunately, due to space limitations, only the first five will be presented in this column; the remaining five will be covered in the next issue, if I remember what they are by then. Editor Ed Neal said, “The full-length article could create an explosion in the print version of the journal, unlike anything I’ve seen.” Now, here is the first five.

### 1. Write Everyday

In the movie *Finding Forrester*, fictitious Pulitzer Prize winning novelist William Forrester (played by everyone’s fave James Bond, Sean Connery) gave the following advice on writing to his talented 16-year old mentee Jamal Wallace, whose secret passion was writing:

You write your first draft with your heart. You rewrite with your head. The first key to writing is to write, not to think. If you try to write the perfect page one, you’ll never get to page two.

This quote says a lot about writing. It suggests four points:

1. Write all of the time as much as you can
2. Write with your heart
3. Write with your head
4. Write your first draft, then go back and revise it as many times as needed; don’t obsess over every sentence and paragraph with corrections as you’re writing

This tip will address number 1; the other three points will be covered in other tips.

*What do you write?* You need to force yourself to write responses to e-mails, texts, tweets, comments to blogs and online discussions, etc. Search for every opportunity to write. Even better, create them by formally mapping out a writing project, such as the following:

- professional or social blog
- section of an article
- piece of a chapter or report
- chapter in an accreditation self-study
- portion of a speech or lecture
- jokes for an article, presentation, or stand-up gig
- scene for a play or screenplay
- scene for a TV movie of the week with Tom Selleck (Oops! Wait. He’s not available because he’s in *Blue Bloods* this fall.)
- any chunk of a manuscript

*Try chunking.* Think about your writing in short bits, pieces, and chunks, not total papers. They’re easier to com-

plete. Research by Boice (2000) indicated that scholars who write everyday in small chunks published significantly more articles than occasional big chunkers. Chunk writing keeps the writing juices and other bodily fluids flowing and your brain neurons-synapses firing, unless, of course, you’re on crystal meth. The more frequently you write, the more you improve your ability to express your thoughts grammatically and mechanically, plus there’s more flowing and firing. You’re honing the art and craft of your writing.

*Set writing as high priority.* What ever you commit to write should be part of your “to-do” list every day. It should be important and urgent, category A, on your list. Your writing is high priority. Record what you write and the time it required in your PDA or iGismo. This written commitment pushes writing to the forefront of everything you do. It should become a daily habit, not an afterthought.

### 2. Write Everywhere

Probably the best place for you to do your best writing is in your *sanctum sanctorum* (a Latin expression, meaning literally, “pull up your baggy pants”). It may be your home or business office, library, Starbucks®, Barnes & Noble®, or a closet in your bomb shelter. Also, wouldn’t it be nice to have big blocks of time to write? The image of a cabin in the woods where you can isolate yourself and write your bestseller seems so attractive.

Unfortunately, you can’t always “have it *your way!*” Your writing life isn’t like Burger King®. Plus, by chapter 3 in the woods, you might get eaten by a bear. There are interruptions, distractions, and ginormous carnivores that can throw you off track. You will need to find ways to adapt to venues other than your “ideal,” though less comfortable than your *sanctum*.

If you only rely on your best time, place, and conditions to write, you won’t be nearly as productive as you could be. As noted previously, Boice (2000) found that scholars who wrote every day in short bursts produced 10 times more published articles than those who wrote occasionally in large time blocks. If you don’t have those large blocks, you still need to find time to write. It’s a time-management issue.

Use bursts of 10-minute to several-hour time blocks at different venues to write your guts out. Don’t waste your time in a waiting room reading an out-of-date magazine featuring Lindsay Lohan’s prison experiences or quarterback Brett Favre’s explanation for why he’s coming out of retirement for the 17<sup>th</sup> time. Use that time to produce. (*Nonwriting Note:* If writing seems inconvenient for whatever reason, use the time to read *The Chronicle*, articles and other materials for your writing, articles for which you need to write reviews, or GQ or O [*Oprah Magazine*], if you need a wardrobe tune-up.)

*Be prepared.* Always be prepared for short bursts to write on the fly. Consider the following:

1. dump your laptop (with power cord, mouse, and flashdrive), iPad, or other device into a padded bag, attaché case, or your backpack,
2. find a secluded location in a lobby or waiting room,
3. create a make-shift office with a semi-comfortable chair and mini-table next to an electrical outlet, and
4. plug in your puppy.

*Write on the fly.* Now you're ready to start writing with your heart and typing lots of hyphenated words, like the ones in number 3 above, at any of these venues:

- Doctors', vets', and dentists' offices
- Hospital emergency room, unless you're the patient bleeding profusely
- Hospital waiting room or cafeteria during a friend's or family member's surgery, unless you're the surgeon or nurse
- MVA or DMV, while you're sitting and rotting for your license renewal, title, registration, or anything else involving your vehicle
- Airports and airplanes, except those tiny props with big propellers which can make you hurl (You'd be surprised at what your mind can create at 37,000 feet)
- Trains, buses, and their stations, but you may need a patch if you get motion sickness while reading
- Banks, but not during robberies
- Large post offices with loong lines
- Your broken-down car waiting for AAA, the police, or a private tow truck
- Police station, waiting to be interrogated or booked
- Courthouse, waiting for your time in court for a speeding or parking ticket, trial, or jury verdict for something worse
- Your prison cell, if the trial didn't go well
- Cruises and large boats that don't tip over
- Restaurants, cafeterias, and coffee shops, waiting for someone to show up or a waiter/waitress
- Car dealer, gas station, and Midas Muffler waiting rooms for repairs
- Vacation resorts, if the resort or roommate turns out to be a bum

*Leverage putrid service.* The quality of service provided by many businesses and institutions is putrid and it seems to be getting worse. We can experience extremely long wait times and delays at all of the preceding venues. My challenge to you is: *Leverage that putrid service to the benefit of your writing.* Shoehorn your writing into any wait time you have available. Don't waste your energy with negative self-talk, complaining about delays you can't control; seize them as opportunities to write. When lousy service

rears its ugly wait time, your writing attitude should kick in: "Wow! Another opportunity to write or read my articles or O."

*No access needed.* Although most of the venues now have Internet access (some for free), except for Lindsay Lohan's prison cell, that doesn't matter for most major writing activities. You don't need to be online to write blogs, reports, articles, article reviews, books, etc. Any piece of writing can be copied and pasted onto any platform or site later.

*Hunker down.* You will be amazed at how much you can complete in 15–30 minutes or longer blocks if you're able to rivet your attention on your writing. For example, regular wait times between connecting flights can be 1–6 hours. That's potential writing time. You can either get angry or write; it's *your* attitude and choice.

Be prepared to write at any of those venues. The more you write in these public settings, the more you can build up your concentration skills. Since you're writing every day, *writing on the fly becomes a habit*; writing in your office or with the bears becomes a luxury. There is no excuse for not writing. "You can do it!"

### 3. Conquer Distractions and Interruptions

Wherever you choose to write — and now you have a long list of options from Tip 2 — turn off your cell phone and all electronic equipment before take-off... WAIT! You're not on an airplane. Oops. Sorry. I meant turn off e-mail and order a "cease and desist" on people you know, pets licking your feet, kids grabbing at your clothes, Keith Lockhart (with guest artist Yo-Yo Ma) and the Boston Pops, and any other distractions, if possible. Writing can be challenging by itself. You can only control so much, unless you're a recluse or Tom Wolfe.

*Don't fluster.* Don't let distractions and interruptions derail your thoughts or fluster you. You look a little flustered right now. Unfluster. Make every effort to concentrate and stay focused on the task at hand. Be flexible and adapt to your writing surroundings. Don't be tempted by the distractions. Block them out and stop flustering.

*Conquer public distractions.* The more you write in public venues, such as the ones on that long list, the better you become at concentrating on your writing. This section of the article was written during a 3.5 hour layover in the Minneapolis airport with constant announcements blaring on the intercom, phones ringing or playing songs, blenders blending at the Starbucks® near my make-shift office table, people talking loudly, and toddlers screaming. Under these airport conditions, you have few options and almost no control over the distractions. Of course, if you are a member of an elite airline club with access to a much quieter lounge, you're all set to write during your flight layovers. Otherwise, do your best to deal with the

distractions, focus on your writing, and stop wasting time reading this article.

Sometimes you have to adopt the perspective that you are going to write in spite of every distraction, interruption, and obstacle thrown at you. Your productivity as a writer hinges on your commitment, determination, and ability to ward off bears. Persevere in your writing the same as you would for anything else you want to attain, like full professor or tenure.

#### 4. Write for a Niche

You can't write for everybody. Well, maybe some people can, but most can't. It's best to carve out a piece of your own territory, turf, piece of the rock, and put yourself in good hands with Allstate® because the cutesy GEICO® gecko is becoming annoying. I bet you have an itch to know your niche. Pick a *niche* (derived from the French word, "enrique iglasius," meaning literally, "your retina's detached").

*Key questions.* Answer these questions:

- Who is interested in your writing?
- Who cares about what you have to contribute?
- What definable group do you know well enough that could benefit from your work?
- What is the demographic?
- What do they read and need?
- Could you put yourself in their jobs and see their professional worlds through their detached retinas?

*Define your niche.* Clearly define your readership or audience. Draft a profile of what they look like, for example, 30–80 year-old, male and female, all ethnic, semi-to fully-pretentious university professors. YIIKES! That a tough group! Maybe take pics of your niche and post them on Facebook.

*Target your writing.* Write specifically for your audience and think about your niche in what you write and how you write it. Your writing must connect with that group. It drives your writing by providing the focus, direction, purpose, and style. Custom tailor your writing (and humor) to fit your target readership. Within the above group example, your writing will be very different for researchers, teachers, general practitioners, and clinicians. Take careful aim to tantalize, captivate, and dazzle those readers with your writing gifts and messages that will improve their professional lives.

#### 5. Write With a Purpose

Like DUHHH! Everyone is bombarded with material to read in every form coming from every direction. Why are you writing? Why should anybody read what you

write, even the niche you identified in Tip 4? Write with a purpose and specific outcome in mind. You should be able to answer one or more of the following questions:

- ❖ What can you contribute that's new? (Or, tell me something I don't know.)
- ❖ What can you contribute with a different spin from anyone else?
- ❖ What problem can you solve?
- ❖ How can you help someone?
- ❖ Who will benefit or gain?
- ❖ Who cares?
- ❖ How can you make a colleague a better researcher, teacher, or clinician?
- ❖ How can you make someone's life
  - easier?
  - healthier?
  - safer?
  - more meaningful?
  - more productive?
  - more efficient?
  - more influential?
  - more satisfying?

In other words, "*Your writing is all about your readers; it's not about you. It's what you can do for them that counts*" (Berk's Law, 2010). Match your expertise to your readers' needs.

These questions have to be answered whether you're writing a blog, annual report, research article, or book. If the outcome isn't significant to your readership, they won't read your blog or article or buy your book. Your writing must be salable to your readers.

### And, the Rest of the Story

The remaining five tips will be described in the spring 2011 issue of this journal. Thanks for reading. Now get back to your writing. See you after the holidays.

### Reference

Boice, R. (2000). *Advice for new faculty members: Nihil nimus*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

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