Enhancing Writing Productivity: Tactics for Success

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How many times have you heard colleagues say they just don’t have time to write? They want to write and have great ideas but their work never seems to get translated into words on paper or in print. Maybe you’ve heard others say they just can’t write on their own, they can’t get started, they have too many interruptions, or they need some motivation? Maybe they need support and accountability to complete their writing. Have you ever wondered why some people are productive writers and others aren’t? What is the trick? If you examine some of the behaviors of successful writers you will notice there are
some things that set them apart from writer “wannabes.” You might find it helpful to consider some new approaches to your writing behaviors so that you too can be a productive writer.

**TIME FOR WRITING**

Before you can increase your writing productivity you have to examine your time usage and know where your time goes. Do you know how much time you spend checking email, attending meetings, or writing? Most people inaccurately perceive their work time and the tasks that they do (Marquis & Huston, 2015). Reports suggest that on average adults spend 23 hours per week online using email, texting, or engaged with social media (Mielach, 2013). Chances are those electronic devices are consuming more of your time than you think. Could your repeated checking of email or signing on to social media be interfering with your writing?

Consider a time inventory that can help you keep track of your daily activities with a log or diary of your work. This time inventory can be as simple as creating a table and recording the specific activity completed, start and stop time spent on the activity or duration, and any other comments about the activity such as emotions or energy level. It is important to record these activities as they occur throughout the day and not rely on your memory to document activities at the end of the day. Log your activities for approximately 5 days and review how you spend your time. Tally how much time you devote to various activities paying particular attention to the time you spend writing. Do you even include writing as part of your week? How many hours did you write? Is that time sufficient for you to meet your writing goals?
Another way to analyze time usage is to download time tracking software that records what you are doing. There are numerous application available. One online application called Rescue Time (rescuetime.com) runs in the background of your computer or mobile device and monitors websites and applications you are using. It tracks the amount of time spent and provides a daily use report. Applications such as this are helpful because they don’t require you to interrupt your work for tracking activities on your own. A free version of this application offers basic tracking that will enable you to get a picture of your usage. An upgraded version provides more extensive reporting information but does require a small monthly fee, currently $9USD per month. An added benefit of this application is that it can also allow you to block designated computer activities during specified time periods. So, if you struggle to avoid the temptation of email, social media, or other computer activities while writing, you can use this software to block your use during designated times.

Once you have tracked your time usage, you can quickly analyze this data and find out how much time is devoted to writing. Chances are you will probably find lots of things filling your day including meetings, appointments, and computer-based activities and little time for scholarly pursuits. Seeing how much time you spend on current activities will allow you to reconsider your time use and eliminate some time you may be spending unnecessarily, excessively, and unknowingly. Take a few moments after reading this article to eliminate or shorten the time you spend on nonproductive activities and schedule some time to write into your day or week.

Writing shouldn’t just happen when you have free time and all other work is complete. If writing is important to you, you will make time in your schedule to
write. Just like some people make time for exercise, family, or other commitments, productive writers make time to write. Regardless of what method you decide to use, time tracking and analysis of your activities can be an important first step to making time for writing.

It is important to not only schedule writing time but to tap into the most productive time for your writing. Analyze the rhythms of the day and consider your energy levels throughout the day. Do the right activities at the right time. Some writers are most alert first thing in the morning and find it helpful to begin their day writing when they are rested and have high energy levels. Some dedicated writers even set an alarm and get up early for writing. Others may find it more effective to spend time later in the day after the rush of the daily activities are over. Writing after lunch when you are tired and feeling that postprandial slump may not be most effective. So, think about your attentiveness, energy, and alertness for the tasks you need to accomplish and pick the right activity for the right time. Regardless of what time you select, pick a time that works for you and put it on your schedule.

Once you have scheduled your writing time, keep this time sacred and enforce this decision. Don’t get distracted by other activities. Focus solely on your writing goal or planned writing task. Don’t answer email, browse social media, take phone calls, or do household activities. If writing is occurring in a work location, close your door and use a do not disturb sign. If it makes you more comfortable, you can indicate when you will be available (after your writing time is over). If writing at home, don’t be tempted to do household activities. Engaging in tasks like laundry or cleaning are avoidance activities and take you away from writing. If you are writing at home, family members may think that you are not busy and will disturb you. Make this writing
session protected time and inform those around you that you are working.

Sometimes, because of distractions or other environmental conditions, traditional office work spaces may not be the ideal writing location. You may need to consider writing in another location such as a local library or coffee shop. Those spaces may allow you to work without disruptions. But you also need to consider how quiet an environment you need for writing. Coffee shops can be noisy, busy, and good for people watching. Is this the right place for you to write?

Another helpful approach to manage writing time may be the Pomodoro Technique (pomodorotechnique.com). This method involves setting a timer (originally conceived with a tomato shaped timer but any timer will work) for 25 minutes and working uninterrupted on a task. When 25 minutes are up, take a short break (five minutes) and then begin working again for 25 minutes. Continue this approach for the designated time scheduled for writing. If you have long blocks of writing time available you may need to take a longer break (20 minutes) after four Pomodoro cycles. Other computer apps such as My Minutes (myminutesapp.com) allow you to set a timer with the minimum or maximum amount of time you want to spend on a task. You can even get reminders, notifications, and updates on your progress. These approaches may help you to manage your writing more effectively.

SEEK SUPPORT

Writing can be a solitary activity, but some writers will benefit from the support of others during the writing process. Support can come in many forms, whether it be an individual peer offering support for writing or a more
formal writing group that meets on a regular basis to write and talk about writing progress and problems. Some formal writing groups regularly meet in person to set goals, provide progress updates, encourage others through the writing process, or offer the companionship of other writers. One popular writing group originating in San Francisco, CA called Shut Up & Write! offers “meetups” for writers so they can get together for individual writing time, usually an hour, followed by social activities such as coffee and discussions about writing. Online writing groups have also developed and can offer the same structure but do so in a virtual world, making them more convenient and accessible. The writing group meetups have advanced as a virtual movement where writers can engage in the activity at any location and tweet their progress using the hashtag #SUWTues (for people in the Asia-Pacific region), #SUWTUK (for people in the UK and Western Europe) or #SUWTNA (for people in the US and Canada). Regardless of the format and structure, some authors enjoy having the opportunity to reflect upon the writing experience and gather with others for writing and support.

SET GOALS

Productive writers set writing goals and deadlines. Rather than setting a goal for the amount of time spent writing, you may benefit from setting a goal for productivity. Various tracking approaches can be used from simple methods of using word processing functions and recording words written per session to programs that will track your writing and monitor your word counts during writing. Some writers form clubs or groups that commit to writing and set goals such as writing 100 words a day for 100 days straight and publicly sharing their progress with the writing group. Websites or online groups can also offer electronic methods of setting regular writing goals and tracking
progress. One such site is 750 words (750words.com) which, for a small fee, monitors your writing session and provides you with logs of your daily progress, productivity analyses, awards badges for progress, and even examines your writing to give an indication of emotional content in your writing entry.

Regardless of the type of goal you set, consider putting your goal in writing, keeping it visible, and set a reasonable writing pace. Chunk larger writing projects into smaller goals that can be easily accomplished. Rather than focusing on overwhelming writing projects, such as writing a book, establish microquotas or smaller goals that specify the incremental writing goals that can be reasonably accomplished. Work on one chapter of the book at a time rather than facing a large project that can seem monumental.

At first, using some of these approaches may make you feel that you are forcing your writing behavior. However, these techniques may help you to make writing a habit and become part of your routine. Create behavior chains that link writing to learned contextual cues. In other words, stack or piggyback your writing activities onto behaviors or activities that you already do and consistently keep those items linked together. Build the activity into an existing cycle of events such as wake up and write for 30 minutes. Or, after dinner have a cup of coffee and write 200 words. Reward yourself if you achieve your goal and soon these activities will be positively linked together by learned cues and rewards. Over time these items become part of your habit or sequence of activities that are linked together and are automatic (Duhigg, 2012).

Give some of these strategies a try and see if you can become a more
productive writer. Remember to start small so that the tasks are not overwhelming and then you can gradually increase. It may take some time and you will probably experience some challenges but keep at it. Maybe your colleagues will soon be looking at you and wondering how you have become a productive and successful writer.

REFERENCES


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