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Point/Counterpoint: Getting Started on Writing

Point/Counterpoint: Getting Started on Writing a Manuscript

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POINT (RW):

What happens when you sit down to write? Does it flow easily or does your mind wander and the screen remain empty? Do you find that the harder you try to find the words, the harder it is to find them? Well, you're not alone and if you want to be a writer you must find some way of overcoming this barrier and filling the screen. After all, the adages "You can edit a bad page; but you cannot edit a blank page"; and "First drafts do not have to be perfect, they just need to be written," hold true for any writer. I think many people have problems getting started

because they wish to get it right first time, and then worry about what they will write and how it will read.

I write quite prolifically but I suffer from all the above. It becomes easier with time, but the barriers never recede totally. Having the right mindset is important and I find it helps me to remember that each piece of writing I read is the product of someone overcoming whatever barriers they had—many worse than mine. It also helps to accept some of the distractions such as incoming emails and social media. Deliberately resisting them can lead to further resistance and stress; they may also provide short and welcome breaks from writing.

Another distraction from writing is the feeling that you do not have enough material at hand or that you have not read enough to know what you are writing about. You do; don't surround yourself with all the relevant articles and books you can find. You will only find out what you need by making a start. Write the manuscript you want to write and then go and find the references to back up your points; if you can't find anything to support your point then it may need to be amended or it may be an original idea. Write it down anyway and carry on writing. If you cannot think of the "best" word to describe something, then just use the first one that comes into your head— it's usually the best one. If you must use a technical term but cannot recall it then write anything close to it and come back to it. I tell people: "If you can't recall the word for 'elephant' then write down 'big ears, long nose' and carry on." You must not interrupt the flow of your writing

A practical approach I use is, deliberately, to break the writing down into small steps and not to think about the total number of words I am required to report. The best way to do this is to have reasonable targets either daily or each time you sit down to write. Mine is 500 words for each writing session, and I ensure that I stop once that is achieved. If I have any ideas in my mind at the point of reaching my

target, I write these as bullet points. This means they do not get forgotten and it also gives me a starting point the next time I open the file to write.

Use the structure of the piece you are writing to help you write. If you are writing a journal article you will be provided with headings such as: Introduction; Methods; Results; and Discussion. Don't feel you have to start at the beginning of an article and work your way through to the end in that order. If you have already done the study, then you can write the Methods section. Indeed, you could write the Methods section before you have even done the study! Once the study is completed you should write the results and build the rest of the manuscript around those sections. If you are writing the Introduction and you have an idea for the Discussion, then jump to that section and write it there—and include that in your word count for the day. To facilitate this process, it is helpful to structure your Word file for the manuscript prior to writing it by entering the required headings and using the “page break” (Ctrl & Enter) to separate them. You then have the “shelves” of your article and all you have to do is “stack” them.

At this stage I advise saving the file, closing it, backing it up, and forgetting about it until the next time you can work on it. You have completed the most important step—you've made a start and you should take some satisfaction in that. When you return to manuscript you will be in a good frame of mind to start working on it again. It is important to keep writing. By this I am referring to the adage: “Write don't edit.” Don't worry how your words look when you first type them and don't try to make the prose perfect as you go along. We usually don't know what we are going to write until we start writing. Simply write, let the ideas flow and put them down in any order you wish. Continue writing until you have a complete first draft. That is the point at which editing should begin. *Roger Watson*

COUNTERPOINT (LHN)

As always, Dr. Watson provides excellent guidance on writing for publication and getting started with a manuscript. While I don't disagree (completely) with any of his points, I think there are nuances of difference between his advice and what I would suggest—or what I do myself. As Editor-in-Chief of *Nurse Author & Editor* I am taking the privilege of sharing a few of my thoughts as a counterpoint to his guidance.

His first statement, “What happens when you sit down to write?” is a good one and I think it demands a personal assessment of your writing style. For me, I know that I do a lot of my writing in my head and when the time is ready, I can sit down at the computer and the words come out. If I sit down prematurely, then I do find I am staring at a blank screen and worse, wasting my time. Of course, “writing in my head” requires discipline—I don't just say to myself, “Well, one of these days the words will come along.” With that mindset, nothing would ever get written! Rather, I have a topic and a deadline and with those two motivators, I become a productive ruminator. And once the swirling thoughts begin to take shape, then I seize the moment and get to work.

The issue of social media and email distractions is an important one. The common advice is to turn everything off and put yourself in a cone of silence and start writing. But seriously, in this day and age, how realistic is that? I think, as Roger says, you need to find the balance between notifications, reading, and responding. For me, I have found the “sweet spot” is to receive notifications, which I usually see on my phone (I put the tablet away). I can see headlines, notices, and updates; I only read email which seems urgent (usually something in response to a message I have written) and only respond to email if it is absolutely imperative or time sensitive (and I'll be honest, this happens rarely). It took some time and “brain training” to get to this point, but I can negotiate 1-2 seconds of distraction every so often and still keep the flow of writing going. Another part of what makes this work

is I have carefully curated the notifications I receive: no more Facebook or Twitter (I can look at those when I am ready to look at those) but I still get headlines from the *New York Times* and our local newspaper, plus email, calendar, Dropbox, and a few blogs. It makes the distractions manageable.

“You have not read enough to know what you are writing about.” How true this statement is and I have seen this become the reason that many people never finish...anything! There is always one more article to read, one more citation to chase down. I agree with Roger: you have probably read more than you realize. Which is why I tell everyone that you must have some sort of an organizing system for your literature; this will allow you to keep all the information at your fingertips. Whether it is an electronic system (Endnote, Zotero, or my favorite, Paperpile), a home-grown system in Excel, old fashioned bibliography cards, or a stack of photocopied articles (not efficient, but it works for some people)—knowing what you have read as you get going can be serve as reinforcement that you are ready to write. By having this information handy, you can also add the references as you go along, which is what I do (in contrast to Roger’s advice). Again, our differences on this are nuanced and reflect our individual styles, which go back to my original point: do an assessment of your own style to figure out what works for you.

Next point: have a writing target. I agree with this and I also agree with “chunking”—breaking a task into smaller parts to get the work done. However, I disagree with the advice to stop when you have reached a target. If the words are still coming and you have the time, then keep going. Why stop if you are being productive? I am reminded of an 850 mile road trip I was on, years ago. My plan was to stop and spend the night at the halfway point, then continue the next day. But when I got to mile 500, having already passed the halfway point by 75 miles, I was feeling great, not tired, and just wanted to continue on and get home—so I did. I was happy to spend the night in my own bed, plus I saved the cost of a

motel. Of course, if circumstances were different—bad weather, lots of traffic—I might have stuck with my original plan. But I am a great believer in “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991) and if the flow is there when you are writing, then don’t quit. Keep going until you run out of gas.

The next point from Roger: put in the headings to block out your paper, then write the sections you are ready to write. I agree with this. Too many people try to write in a linear fashion, from beginning to end, and get stymied. They see the Methods section “over there” but can’t get to it because the “Sea of Background” is blocking their path while they stand on the “Island of Introduction.” I think the abstract is easy to write at the end but very hard at the beginning; same with the intro. So just put those two aside and dive in wherever you are comfortable (or, where the words are for you, in your head). Another trick to get going, when you are feeling stumped, is to work on something else, such as a table or figure. These elements need to be completed and will take time, so use your writing time productively for these tasks if the words aren’t flowing for you.

Roger’s last point: write don’t edit—this is probably where we diverge the most in our advice. I write and edit concurrently. For me an adage is, “It’s easier to do something right from the beginning, rather than trying to fix it later.” Now, I temper this advice to myself—I don’t let the editing get in the way of writing. I do want to reach my target of 500+ words/session but I also want them to be good words, to the extent possible. I check spelling and punctuation and I really do make an effort to find the right word on the first pass—and as, noted earlier, I include references as I go. But even with this level of care, everything I write gets edited (and edited again) before I consider it finished. However, I find a great deal of satisfaction in reading a first draft that I have written and saying to myself, “Wow, this is really good!”

To summarize, I think Roger's advice is good and mine is too. As you have seen from reading this, we have places where we are in close sync in terms of style and others where we diverge a bit. But our bottom line is the same: know what you are writing, strategize to be successful (which means know your own personal style and work from that as your strength) and make it your main priority to get the writing work done in an efficient way that brings you (and your co-authors) a great deal of personal satisfaction and feelings of accomplishment. *Leslie Nicoll*

REFERENCE

1. Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1991). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1 edition). New York, NY: Harper Collins.

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