

## ***Why I Wrote This Book and Why You Should Read It***

As a writer, I've had some hard knocks myself. I wrote my dissertation and published my first paper without incident. As I worked on my second journal article, I kept careful records of the time spent. I discovered I worked more than one hundred hours *per page*. This was on the writing only, after the data were collected and the numbers were crunched. I sent the paper to ten of the best-known experts in the area and five responded. They seemed to like it. I made the changes they suggested. I thought the paper was finally ready to go. I sent it out for review, and this is what came back, in red ink, half an inch high:

*This paper is:*

*"very poorly done."*

*"a very badly prepared piece of work."*

*"plagued by myriad problems."*

*"so badly written that few persons will have the patience to try to make sense of it."*

I knew just what to do. I cried.

But when I was done crying, I marched myself up to my office to revise the paper. I ignored the insults and forced myself to respond to each specific comment. Responding to the comments took four and one-half hours, which was less than one-half of one percent of the time spent on the entire paper. Then I fired the paper off to an equally good journal, where it was accepted without revision. I knew there must be a moral to the story; I decided there were two. One moral was clear: Even

if the reviewer dislikes your work, ignore the overall assessment, but respond to each specific comment. Remember the old adage, “Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water.”

I learned something else. My paper was poorly organized and the editor’s comments read like a paint-by-number kit: “Move this here; move that there.” The editor saw bad organization that the experts hadn’t seen. It was transparent to them. They weren’t reading to understand—they already understood. The second moral became clear: Ask non-experts to read drafts of your work. Non-experts, who do not have a terminal degree in your field, will see problems of organization and clarity more easily—and there is nothing they are afraid to ask. In contrast, experts in your discipline will withhold questions for fear of seeming ignorant themselves.

As you can see, I learned about writing at the same school that you probably did: the School of Hard Knocks. But it’s not the only school, or even the best. Much is known about how to become more prolific—and any scholar can. Even when you can’t work harder, there are important ways to work smarter. My experience as a writer convinced me that writing shouldn’t hurt this badly. There are more systematic approaches to write better and faster. These approaches have the advantage that you are less invested in your work when you begin to get criticism—and the criticism is less likely to be harsh when you receive it because your writing is better. Therefore, I decided there should be a program to help scholars flourish. Naturally, it’s a twelve-step program because writing is difficult and writing well is a lifetime project. Writing can feel like one step forward and two steps back—like walking up the down escalator. The steps do not make

writing easy but they break writing down into little tasks that any writer can do.

Much research shows that the steps work if you work the steps. Robert Boice did the basic research on the most important steps. He is the guru of scholarly writing and the author of many books and countless articles on the subject (see for example Boice 1989, 1990, 1994, 1997, 2000). He spent much of his career proving the importance of ideas that would become the two most central steps of the program: writing daily as well as keeping records of your minutes spent writing and holding yourself accountable to someone for doing so. He showed these steps are important regardless of discipline, teaching load, or type of institution (*Boice 1989, 1997*). In one study he performed, a group of scholars wrote the way they had always written—occasionally, in big blocks of time. The group wrote or revised a mean of 17 pages per year. Another group wrote daily, kept records of their time spent writing, and held themselves accountable to others for writing daily. This group wrote or revised a mean of 157 pages per year (*Boice 1989:609*).

Every scholar can become more prolific, and these steps can show you how:

### **Managing Time**

1. Become a manager of your time, not a victim of it.
2. Write 15–30 minutes daily.
3. Record your time spent writing daily—share your records weekly.

### **Writing**

4. Write from the first day of your research project.
5. Post your thesis on the wall and write to it.

## Revising

6. Organize around key sentences.
7. Use key sentences as an after-the-fact outline.

## Getting Help

8. Share early drafts with non-experts and later drafts with experts.
9. Learn how to listen.
10. Respond to each specific comment.

## Polishing and Letting Go

11. Read your prose out loud.
12. Kick it out the door and make 'em say "No."

Deciding to work the steps is difficult for academics because we are trained skeptics. We are trained to think critically and to question everything—from the size of the sample to the quality of the evidence. Naturally, you question whether the twelve steps are the one best way to write. Although one size doesn't fit all, the steps give you a writing system to try on for size. When you try on each step, you broaden your range of skills as a writer. In this way, even steps you don't adopt permanently make you a better writer for having tried them. Suspend disbelief and act as if the steps will work for you. Go through the motions until they do. "Fake it 'til you make it."

I am occasionally confronted by someone who says that the steps don't work. When this happens, I always ask the same question, "For how long did you try the steps, especially the most important one about writing daily?" The answer is never measured in months or weeks or even days. The answer is always, "I wasn't able to write daily." My response is always the same, too, "Then how do you know the steps don't work?"

My challenge to you is this: Work the steps and discover how they work in your life. My other challenge is that every time you fall off the writing wagon, keep coming back (and back and back!) to the steps that can make writers great.