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 world and five responded. They seemed to like it. I made the changes they suggested and 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 (Gray, 1999, p. 140).

I knew there must be a moral to the story; I decided there were three. 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: Don’t
write too long alone. I should have had others read and respond
to my work far earlier in the writing process, perhaps after two
hours or ten hours per page. There was a third moral. 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 the experts. They weren’t reading to understand—they already
understood. The third moral became clear: Ask less expert readers
to read drafts of your work (from a workshop with Joe Williams).
They will see problems of organization and clarity more easily
and they will read your work more like the editor of the journal
you are likely to send it to. In contrast, the experts that I sent it to
looked right past poor organization because they weren’t reading
to understand—they already understood.

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.
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 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, a social psychologist, did the basic research
on the two most important steps. He is the guru of scholarly writing and the author of four books and many 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 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 that these steps are important regardless of discipline, teaching load, or type of institution (Boice, 1989, 1997). In one of his studies, 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 or nine times as many pages (Boice, 1989, p. 609).

The steps work if you work the steps. 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?”

Deciding to work the steps is difficult for academics because we are trained skeptics. We are trained to question everything—from the size of the sample to the quality of the data. 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. Think of it as an empirical question: The only way to know whether the steps work is to try them.

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

**Managing Time**
1. Differentiate the “urgent” from the important.
2. Write daily for 15–30 minutes.
3. Record time spent writing daily—share 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 Publishing**
11. Read your prose out loud.
12. Kick it out the door and make ’em say “No.”

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