

Why I Wrote This Book and Why You Should Read It

Twenty-five years ago, I wrote a paper about a cost-benefit analysis of prison, jail and probation for burglars. Although the article was the only research I was working on, I worked on it for three years. During that time, I kept records of the time I spent on the paper and discovered I had spent 100 hours *per page*. I thought the paper was finally ready to share so I sent it to 10 of the best-known experts in the world. Five responded and they seemed to like it. I made the changes they suggested and sent it out for review, and this is what came back, in red ink, half an inch high:

“You obviously didn’t spend enough time on this paper.”

”This paper is too bad to send out for review.”

“This paper is 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. I ignored the insults and forced myself to respond to each specific criticism. 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 paper. I fired the paper off to an equally good journal, where it was accepted without revision (*Gray, 1999, p. 140*).

I knew there was a moral to the story; I decided there were three. One moral was clear: “Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water.” Even if the reviewer dislikes your work, ignore the overall assessment, but respond to each specific comment.

There was another moral: Don't write too long alone. I wrote w-a-a-a-y 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 10 hours per page. There was a third moral. My paper was poorly organized and the editor's comments were full of suggestions such as, "Move this here; move that there." The editor saw bad organization that the experts hadn't seen. It was transparent to the experts because 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. Because they may not be in your area of specialty, they will read your work more like an editor of a journal or a grant review board.

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. Naturally, it's a 12-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 becoming more prolific by writing daily and holding oneself accountable for doing so. He is the guru of scholarly writing and the author of four books and many articles on the subject (see for example, *Boice, 1990, 1994, 1996, 2000*). 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 very unproductive 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 more by a factor of nine (*Boice, 1989, p. 609*). As discussed in more detail later in the book, most studies do not produce such spectacular results; still, the results are impressive enough. Studies show that scholars become more productive following a variety of interventions, which include: writing courses, writing groups and writing coaches. A review of the literature showed that when pre- and post data were available for each of these interventions, publication rates improved at least two-fold (*McGrail, Rickard, & Jones, 2006, p. 25*).

Nonetheless, deciding to work the steps is difficult for academics because we are trained skeptics. We question everything—from the size of the sample to the quality of the data. Naturally, you question whether the 12 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 that 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 minutes spent writing and share these records daily.

Writing

4. Write from the first day of your research project.
5. Post your thesis on the wall and write to it.
6. Organize your paper around a template.

Revising

7. Revise paragraphs around key sentences.
8. Use key sentences as an after-the-fact outline.

Getting Help

9. Learn how to listen.
10. Share early drafts with non-experts and later drafts with experts.

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.