

Why I Wrote This Book and Why You Might Want to Read It

As a new faculty member, I worked on only one scholarly manuscript for 3 years. 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 that they suggested and sent it out for review. The editor responded, in red ink, half an inch high: “*You obviously didn’t spend much time on this paper.*”

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 responded to each specific criticism. Responding took four and one-half hours, which was a tiny fraction of the time spent on the paper. I sent it off to an equally good journal, where it was accepted *without revision* (Gray, 1999, p. 140).

As you see, reviewers thrashed and trashed my early papers, which is not uncommon. In fact, the vast majority of grant proposals are rejected and 78% of scholars report that their last paper was rejected at their first choice of journals (Sense About Science, 2010, p. 57). I became determined not to receive blistering reviews and you can join me by taking certain steps.

Each chapter discusses one of 10 elegantly simple steps. The steps are based on informal and formal research. Informally, they have helped my writing and that of many others. By applying the steps, I have written many manuscripts that were accepted immediately with few or no revisions. I am not alone. One reader wrote, “When I apply these steps, my papers are

accepted with fewer rounds of revision—and revisions are minor. It is almost like a magic formula—follow the steps, get more papers accepted with fewer revisions” (Mark Belk, personal communication, December 19, 2017). I have shared the steps with 10,000 scholars at 120 institutions. Every group I work with teaches me something, and I have shared their collective wisdom in these pages.

More formally, the steps are based on two studies in which scholars applied the steps and kept records of their experiences (Gray & Birch, 2000; Gray et al., 2018). In the most recent study, more than 90 scholars wrote daily and kept records of the manuscripts submitted. These scholars increased their productivity from a rate of two submissions per year to *almost six* (Gray et al., p. 243, Results section, para. 4). Scholars made this giant leap by writing only 30 minutes per day, 4 days per week.

Ninety-five percent of these scholars agreed that the quality of their writing improved, perhaps for two reasons (Gray et al., 2018, Results section, para. 8). First, scholars were required to organize their manuscripts and their paragraphs around topic or key sentences. In the words of one scholar (Gray et al., 2018, Results section, para. 9), “I have worked on organization by using the “key sentence” concept. Thanks to the simple idea, my work is more readable, compelling and well organized.”

Second, scholars were required to get feedback from others on drafts of their writing before submitting their manuscripts formally. The informal feedback improved writing. Another participant wrote (Gray et al., 2018, Results section, para. 8), “After my group read my draft, I approached editing more

confidently knowing exactly which changes would make my draft more comprehensible to readers.”

Despite the research supporting the steps, deciding to apply them is difficult for scholars 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 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 as written, you broaden your range of skills as a writer. Having tried the steps once, adjust them for your personal style. 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 can work for you is to try them.

I spent years learning about writing at the same school that you might be attending now—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. Try some of them and you will find that, as a writer, you are flourishing while some of your peers are floundering.

I suggest that you use the book as a workbook, experimenting with the steps on sections of prose as you go, ranging in length from a few paragraphs to a full section. It is not necessary to work with the same prose as you work through the steps. Instead work on prose that makes sense. The book is divided into two parts, writing and revising, with the first four steps on writing and the last six on revising. In Steps 1 and 2, write every day on any scholarly topic you want to write about.

In Step 3, write informally on a new topic, as if writing in a personal journal. In Step 4, outline the topics from a section of an exemplar, or an excellent manuscript, and draft a somewhat less informal paragraph to each topic. For Steps 3 and 4, it is fine if you start with only the vaguest of ideas because the method taught will bring your ideas into focus. In Step 5 on revising paragraphs, select a section of a manuscript, preferably the section you have that is most polished, and write or revise a key sentence for each paragraph. In Step 6, make a list of those key sentences. In Step 7, send the section out for a few carefully selected people to read and respond to informally before formal peer review. In Step 8, respond effectively to their comments. In Step 9, read your revised section out loud. In Step 10, apply each of the steps to a full manuscript and kick it out the door!

In this way, the book lays out 10 steps for working smarter. Steps are important 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. These elegantly simple steps break writing down into little tasks that any scholar can do. They were written for faculty, graduate students, full-time researchers, and others. In fact, they were written for anyone writing academic articles, books, theses, or dissertations—and especially for those who write grant proposals because such writing is fiercely competitive.

Every scholar can become more prolific, and these steps will show you how. My challenge to you is this: Apply the steps and see how they work in your life. And every time you stop applying them, keep coming back (and back and back!) to the steps that can make writers great.