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# Write a Lot Better

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## Part One – Becoming a Better Writer

*“Think of it this way: Maybe every writer can’t be Proust, but every writer can be a better writer.”*

(Palumbo, 2000, p. 63)

Writing a lot and writing well are not always compatible processes. Those who write a lot may be tempted to focus on quantity rather than quality. They may just want to get their products published rather than spend quality time on refining the writing process. But those who do write well may expend so much effort in shaping and reshaping their ideas and their sentences that their output is limited. So, are there ways that could help us as new or old academics to write more and to write well or, at least, to become better writers? In part one I address the issue of trying to improve our writing by offering, in effect, an extended review of a classic text – William Zinsser’s *On Writing Well*. In the second part I look at ideas provided in a recent text (Silvia, 2007) to help us to maintain writing quality whilst at the same time increase the quantity of our output. Both parts are intended to be useful to academics and to postgraduate students who want to ‘write a lot better’.

### Writing Well or Better

*On Writing Well*, now in its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (Zinsser, 2006), is not often cited in books on academic writing in the UK (for two exceptions, see Murray and Moore, 2006 and Wellington, 2003). And yet, I think Zinsser has much to offer struggling academic writers, and which of us does not struggle, since academic writing is a tough old trade? His main advice may be summed up in two quotations:

*“Nobody told all the new computer writers that the essence of writing is rewriting. Just because they’re writing fluently doesn’t mean they are writing well.”*

The principles of writing well haven’t changed in 30 years: *“That will still require plain old hard thinking...and the plain old tools of the English language.”*  
(Zinsser, 2006, pp. xii-xiii)

Zinsser discusses his principles of writing well in seven short chapters: the Transaction, Simplicity, Clutter, Style, the Audience, Words and Usage. I use these headings to help summarise some of his main points, to offer comments on them and to connect them with the work of other writers, drawn from fields including academic writing, ethnography, philosophy, psychology and sociology.

### The Transaction

In all good writing, even academic writing, there is a ‘personal transaction’ between writer and reader. This is because what any writer actually deals in is not the subject being written about ‘but who he or she is’. What holds the reader as much as anything is ‘the enthusiasm of the writer for his field’ and what keeps

the reader reading is 'an aliveness' which comes from the writer's 'humanity and warmth'. This is not about using gimmicks to 'personalise' the author but 'using the English language in a way that will achieve the greatest clarity and strength' (ibid., p. 5).

What Zinsser offers, I think, is a practical version of a transactional theory of reading and writing. The theory owes much to the philosophy of John Dewey, the psychology of Jerome Bruner and to theorists of writing such as Louise Rosenblatt and Jeanne M. Connell. For them, transaction signifies 'a mutual sharing of assumptions and beliefs about how the world is, how mind works, what we are up to, and how communication should proceed' (Bruner, 1986, p. 57). A transactional theory of reading and writing highlights sharing to indicate that meaning is made by the reader from signs sent by the author within a particular discourse community.

Transactional theory is thus 'a reader-plus-text perspective', in which a link is made between reader and text during the attempt to make meaning. This theory connects with Dewey's notion of the transactional nature of experience (see Connell, 2008, p. 106) where there is no radical separation between the reader and the text in the inquiry process called reading. Instead, the reader connects with the text and makes meaning from the text. In order to join a community of inquiry, new academic writers need, first, to engage in 'transactions with the texts of established authors' (Rosenblatt, 1988, p. 16) and, second, to learn how to critique those texts from their own critical standpoints (see Badley, 2008, for a fuller discussion).

A simpler view of writing as transaction is that 'the printed page brings two remote strangers, reader and writer, in contact'. A more profound view is that 'no event in civilisation is more important, or more intimate, than this contact – this contact right here now – between a writer and a reader' (Jones, 2007, p. 178). Indeed 'the actual "writing" turns out to be, wholly or in part, the reader's job: the reader actively writes each sentence as he goes; this little fountain of words rises within *your* brain stem. Its substance is provided by *your* reflection and experience' (ibid., p. 179). This transaction between writer and reader then becomes 'a very real conversation' (ibid., p. 181). All writing, when properly managed, is 'but another name for conversation' according to Laurence Sterne.

### **Simplicity**

Zinsser's criticism of American writing is also a criticism, in my view, of much academic writing:

*"Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon."*

(Zinsser, 2006, p. 6)

His objection to the (North) American tendency to use 'clotted language' and 'to inflate and thereby sound important' is also an objection to the density and opacity of academic prose. Instead, 'the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components' especially by removing unnecessary long words and 'every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure who is doing what'. His advice boils down to 'simplify, simplify'. This requires that we clear our heads of clutter because only 'clear thinking becomes clear writing: one can't exist without the other'. Unfortunately, 'writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident' (ibid., pp. 6-9).

But is 'simplify, simplify' a helpful guide for academics who have to write complex, detailed and extended texts using an appropriate academic voice (see Vardi, 1999)? Is 'simplify, simplify' useful in helping us write all our academic analyses, arguments, comments, definitions, descriptions, evaluations, explanations, explications, expositions, interpretations, narratives, reports and summaries? Can academic voice really be simplified? Aren't we required to display our subject knowledge in the specific and complex language of the discipline? Don't we have to use the accepted vocabulary and phraseology so that we actually sound like a biologist or a historian or a psychologist? Does 'simplify, simplify' help us contribute to that 'creation and transformation of academic knowledge' which is usually regarded as the main task of the expert academic writer (see Geister, 1994)? Can 'simplify, simplify' help us engage critically with the complexities of important concepts and theories? Would 'simplify, simplify' help us assert or claim authority in our own fields? And could 'simplify, simplify' simply lead us into writing simplistically?

Eagleton argues that there are ideas, especially in science, which cannot be adequately simplified and that wisdom cannot always be presented as simple and spontaneous. Yet he also points out that 'it is possible to write clearly about some esoteric issues, just as some theorists manage with heroic perversity to write esoterically about plain ones' (Eagleton, 2004, p. 77). So Zinsser's 'simplify, simplify' should not be seen as advice to write simplistically. Instead, it should be seen as urging us to *try* to be as clear as possible even when writing about complex ideas. The philosopher Daniel C. Dennett was once told that a book of his was 'too clear to become a cult book'. What that meant was that he was explaining things as carefully as possible. This reminded him of a conversation a friend had had with Michel Foucault: 'Michel, you're so clear in conversation; why is your written work so obscure?' Foucault replied: 'That's because, in order to be taken seriously by French philosophers, twenty-five percent of what you write has to be impenetrable nonsense' (see Dennett, 2006, p. 405, n. 12). Do we all, as academic writers, have to make a portion of our writing nonsensical and impenetrable in order to be taken seriously? Or should we take Zinsser's advice to 'simplify' as much and as often as we justifiably can?

## Clutter

*'Fighting clutter is like fighting weeds – the writer is always slightly behind'* (ibid., p. 12).

To become uncluttered in our writing we need to examine every word we put down: 'writing improves in direct ratio to the number of things we can keep out of it that shouldn't be there'. We need to remember that 'clutter is the official language used by corporations to hide their mistakes'. Our academic writing is cluttered with weeds that smother what we write. We use 'assistance' when we mean 'help', 'facilitate' instead of 'ease', 'implement' instead of 'do', 'sufficient' instead of 'enough' and 'referred to as' rather than 'called'. And we are seduced by fad words like 'prioritise' and 'potentialise'. Most of the first drafts we write can be cut by half without losing their sense if only we followed Zinsser's advice: 'simplify, simplify' (ibid., pp. 12-16).

Fighting clutter means that we have to try to become more concise, and becoming concise means that we have to cut. But cutting sounds negative. We have to learn to see cutting as a positive process, a way of making our writing leaner and more focused. We need to become self-critical (but not hyper-self-critical) editors of our own work. Further, 'editing isn't a cosmetic process. It's a thinking process' (Rhodes, 1995, p. 113). Unfortunately, editing is never really finished since every sentence could still be improved. Also, whilst there is danger in over-editing we need to see editing as 'simply *more writing* – a higher-level (or lower-level, if you prefer) version of the same process whereby you produced the creative draft in the first place' (ibid., pp. 133-134). So, to de-clutter we need to cut: words we over-use and words we don't need; adjectives and adverbs that decorate but add little substance; sentences which repeat; and paragraphs that elaborate rather than clarify. Cutting for Orwell meant deleting both the garbage and the purple prose, and writing less picturesquely and more exactly (Orwell, 2004/1946). Cutting is clearing away the wordy underbrush that chokes the growth of both argument and ideas. To de-clutter is to cut is to clarify is to be concise is to simplify.

## Style

But, again, if we simplify too much won't we end up writing naïve nursery school English? Can our complex academic ideas really be discussed in simple and uncluttered sentences? Zinsser argues that few of us realise how badly we write because few of us have been shown the murky excesses that have crept into our writing which then obstruct what we are trying to say. Cutting an eight-page article down to four pages is easy. The hard part is cutting it down to three. We don't develop our own style of writing by 'embellishing' plain words with 'gaudy similes' and 'tinsel adjectives'. We can't add style by 'garnishing our prose' because 'style is organic to the person doing the writing': 'Readers want the person who is talking to them to sound genuine. Therefore a fundamental rule is: be yourself'. Unfortunately no rule is harder to follow (see Zinsser, 2006, pp. 18-19).

One way to a personal style is, obviously, to write as a person. After all 'writing is an intimate transaction between two people, conducted on paper, and it will go well to the extent that it retains its humanity'. He therefore urges students to write in the first person by using 'I' and 'me' and 'we' and 'us', but 'They put up a fight'. Students and researchers think such writing is egotistical or undignified – 'a fear that afflicts the academic world. Hence the professorial use of "one"...or of the impersonal use of "it is"'. Zinsser doesn't want to read the boring academic called 'one': 'I want a professor with a passion for his subject to tell me why it fascinates *him*' (ibid. pp. 19-20).

Of course using 'I' all the time can be 'a self-indulgence and a cop-out'. And many journal editors won't allow such personal prose. Zinsser's advice here is 'at least think "I" while you write, or write the first draft in the first person and then take the "I"s out. It will warm up your impersonal style'. For even academic writers have to sell themselves and their topics in order to get published and so they have to believe in themselves and their own opinions. As Zinsser points out, 'writing is an act of ego, and you might as well admit it. Use its energy to keep yourself going' (ibid., pp. 17-23).

To develop style, however, we must 'pay attention to sentences'. 'The most effective lesson is to get inside and to work inside sentences, with the ambition to make writing work for you – to make it do good work, to make it thoughtful and compelling, to be noticed and heard, to establish presence, a stylistic self... Style is agonistic. The writer is caught within and struggles to make use of the available materials' (Bartholomae, 2005, p. 15).

Good style in academic prose is clear, direct, and even graceful (Crowley, 1982). It is clear without banality and rigorous without needless technicality: it is swift, unfussy and blunt, and it is readable and understandable at a single reading (Watson, 1987). It eliminates wordiness and shortens sentences, paragraphs and sections (Crowley, 1982). It does not over-use polysyllabic abstract nouns – the besetting sin of scholarly prose (Watson, 1987). Good style, according to C. Wright Mills, is writing as *unpretentious intellectual craftsmen* (sic). And this entails avoiding verbiage, using clear statements, giving solid examples, and guarding against 'weird jargon' and 'pretensions of expertise' (Mills, 1970, pp. 245-248). Even an academic audience should be put off by jargon and pretension.

### **The Audience**

But who is the academic's audience? Most of all, according to Zinsser, we write for ourselves, and we shouldn't think of some great mass out there waiting for our wonderful words: 'There is no such audience – every reader is a different person'. So, initially, we write to please ourselves and, with hard work and some luck, we might even get others interested in what we have to say. If we try to master the tools, simplifying and pruning and striving for order, we can write

cleaner sentences that readers will understand and might actually enjoy. Readers will enjoy what we say if we heed another bit of advice: 'Never say anything in writing that you wouldn't comfortably say in conversation' (ibid., pp. 24-31).

But academics also hope to be read by others interested in the topics they address. These others may not amount to more than a couple of referees for a journal and a small number of readers, assuming their articles were actually accepted for publication. The standard advice for all academics is therefore to target the audience of a particular journal. We can learn to do this by a close reading of the articles that the journal usually publishes and so find out what editors prefer and what they think their audience wants to read. We can then try to ensure that our work is effectively presented with clarity and integrity and written in a suitable style for communication to and with its intended audience. Further, what we write should be understood without 'undue difficulty' because 'the intended audience of scholarship (should) be reasonably broad' (see Glassick et al., 1997, p. 31).

Indeed, without an audience, even an audience of one, there would be no scholarship at all. Scholarship is a continuing conversation, 'a conversation in which one participates and contributes by knowing what is being discussed and what others have said on the subject. Therefore, a project that does not speak to current issues of theory, fact, interpretation, or method is unlikely to contribute to its field, regardless of other virtues' (ibid., p. 27). We write for an audience of others by, in effect, negotiating with them and paying them the respect they are owed for having examined similar issues and topics (see Badley, 2002).

Writing for an audience, even a small one, means that we have to learn how to negotiate the transition from 'writer-based' to 'reader-based' prose, to imagine how a reader would respond to a text and thus to learn how to transform or restructure the text around a goal shared with a reader. This is a matter of imagining a reader's goals, of becoming aware of audience, of tailoring our writing to the needs and expectations of our audience. Writers need to build bridges between their point of view and the reader's, to anticipate and acknowledge the reader's assumptions and biases (although I would also say be ready to challenge them). But the problem of addressing audience is also a matter of transforming the social and political relationships between writers and readers, itself a matter of power and finesse (see Bartholomae, 2005, pp. 64-5).

Zinsser's clear view is that the best approach is always to write for an audience of one – yourself (see Zinsser, 2006, pp. 24-31). But whilst this may be a useful general approach, academic writers do have to try to write for others. We are expected to see the importance of audience, to imagine, if we are to be successful, multiple audiences for our texts: researchers, students, teachers, professionals, policy-makers, publishers, editors, referees, hosts, and even the general public. Realising this means learning to write for different audiences in different styles.

## Words

*Remember that words are the only tools you've got. Learn to use them with originality and care. And also remember: somebody out there is listening.*  
(ibid., p. 36)

Most of our writing is banal: 'no surprise awaits us in the form of an unusual word, an oblique look'. We have to learn to 'be finicky' about the words we choose because 'the race in writing is not to the swift but to the original'. We will only learn to make good choices through good reading because 'writing is learned by imitation'. But we must also learn to 'cultivate the best models'. We need to look words up in dictionaries to check meanings, learn their etymologies and master their nuances. And we need to check how the words we choose sound because readers 'hear what they are reading far more than you realize': 'Therefore such matters as rhythm and alliteration are vital to every sentence'. Again, Zinsser's advice is useful:

*If all your sentences move at the same plodding gait, which even you recognize as deadly but don't know how to cure, read them aloud.*  
(ibid., p. 36)

By reading aloud we can learn when to reverse the order of a sentence, when to alter its length and when to add a fresh word. Words are the best tools we've got (ibid., pp. 32-36). Zinsser's comments are echoed by other writers. For example, the novelist Philip Roth sees his job as one of 'turning sentences around' in order to make them clearer and stronger. And the sociologist Howard Becker points out that we can avoid 'the wooliness and pretentiousness of "classy" writing' by taking out words that aren't working' (Becker, 1986, p. 164). And, again, Orwell is useful in warning us against 'staleness of imagery' and a 'lack of precision' in most of our writing: 'prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house' (Orwell, 2004/1946, p. 105). Further, we are given to using pretentious words – *categorical, constitute, eliminate, liquidate, phenomenon, utilise* – 'to dress up simple statements and give an air of scientific impartiality to biased judgements' (ibid., p. 107). And 'bad writers, and especially scientific, political and sociological writers, are nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones' (ibid., p. 108). Big Brother George is still watching us – fortunately.

## Usage

Usage has no fixed boundaries so it is difficult to decide why one word is good to use and another is cheap. Word freaks ('verbivores' – Pinker, 2007) fight over what is allowable. And 'scholarship hath no fury like that of a language purist faced with sludge'. Guardians of usage are only doing half their job by resisting sloppy language – 'healthwise' and 'rather unique'. They must also welcome immigrant words that add strength and colour to the language – 'dropout' is vivid

and clean but 'senior citizen' is 'typical of the pudgy new intruders from the land of sociology'. Robust words once derided as colloquial should also be welcomed: 'rile', 'shambles', 'trek', 'trigger' and 'tycoon'. The best rule is whether a word fills a real need – 'if it does, let's give it a franchise'. As Zinsser points out, it all comes down to what is 'correct' usage: 'We (Americans) have no King to establish the King's English: we only have the President's English, which we don't want'. But we should try to separate usage from jargon and use good words to express ourselves as clearly and simply as possible (ibid., pp. 37-45).

But one major problem in academic writing is that technical jargon is often necessary and might even be desirable or, at least, acceptable. And we should be wary of dismissing as jargon those ideas with which we just happen to disagree. But when a writer produces a sentence such as 'The in-choate in-fans ab-original para-subject cannot be theorized as functionally *completely* frozen in a world where teleology is schematized into geo-graphy' he is being obscure and silly. This use of jargon may even be unintelligible to the writer as well as to his readers. Indeed 'people who write like this are not even interested in being understood'. We should not accept that difficult ideas have to be dealt with obscurely since 'difficulty is a matter of content, whereas obscurity is a question of how you present that content' (see Eagleton, 2004, pp. 75-77).

Generally, however, it would be hard to argue with the judgement that 'standards of writing in many academic circles are low. Jargon and obtuse prose deprive scholars of the benefit of the interplay that could result from more effective presentation. If scholars present their work in language *as clear and simple as the subject allows*, scholarly communication would be improved not only among colleagues but with the public as well' (Glassick et al., 1997, p. 33, my italics). Sadly, in my view, much academic writing is somewhat opaque and given to unnecessary obfuscation (see Badley, 2002). There is, of course, a danger in trying to write more simply and clearly for a broader audience. It is that such writing may be dismissed as trivial or even resented as popular because 'real' writing can only be produced by using the 'elaborate technical jargon' of an academic discipline (see Grayling, 2006, pp. 82-3). And critics are not always consistent:

*I read reviews that praised me as having skills I never knew I had – related to my unusual use of structure and the simplicity of my prose. And I read the critical ones as well, which pointed out faults that I also never knew I had – related to my unusual use of structure and the simplicity of my prose.*

(Tan, 2007, p. 201)

Perhaps some reviewers, in their destructive feedback, are 'simply protecting their power base and the narrow concerns of a small group', or perhaps they see themselves as actually 'upholding the standards' of a particular journal or of the discipline itself (see Murray, 2005, p. 194). Either way, academic writers should try not to be thrown by adverse criticism but should learn that even divergent

reviews may be helpful reflections of current debates in the field – about content or theory or usage or whatever (ibid., pp. 196-197).

### **Writing Well or Writing Better?**

Do Zinsser's prescriptions help us to write well or, at least, to write a little bit better? Will following his advice help us shift from 'typical sterile, voiceless academic prose' towards scholarly writing that is 'warm, inviting, and intensely personal' (see Olson, 1995)? In many ways the answer is a resounding 'yes'. Academic writing would benefit from being clearer, simpler, more direct, more concise, and less cluttered. The simplest way to enliven our sterile, academic prose is to do what Zinsser tells us. The hard part is actually doing it. This is because doing it requires more 'hard thinking' and yet more 'rewriting'. The only way to learn to write is by writing. And practicing: 'The only way to learn to write is to force yourself to produce a certain number of words on a regular basis' (Zinsser, 2006, p. 49). Also, 'rewriting is the essence of writing well: it's where the game is won or lost' because each new sentence 'almost always has something wrong with it'. This is because it is 'not clear' and 'not logical'. It is 'verbose', 'klunky' and 'full of clutter'. It is 'full of clichés' and 'lacks rhythm'. And 'it can be read in several different ways' (ibid., p. 83). The point is that 'clear writing is the result of a lot of tinkering' (ibid., p. 84).

Unfortunately, we won't write well until we understand that 'writing is an evolving process, not a finished *product*' and that rewriting mostly requires 'reshaping and tightening' our original raw efforts (ibid.) Whereas *writing is writing for yourself*, Zinsser argues that *rewriting* is a matter of 'putting yourself in the reader's place' (ibid.) Indeed, Zinsser states that 'I don't like to write; I like to have written. But I love to rewrite. I especially like to cut'. So, Zinsser urges us 'to enjoy this tidying up process' (ibid., p. 87). Academics, who often feel stressed by all they have to do to get the writing done, let alone to get it published, may well feel that rewriting is not the joyful experience that Zinsser makes it sound.

But even with practice and with more rewriting, our (highly critical) reviewers may think that we have still not got it right. Some will actually like the simplicity of our prose and the way we structure our articles and essays. And others, for various reasons, won't. If we 'write with respect for the English language at its best – and for readers at their best' (ibid., p. 233) then perhaps we will persuade journal referees and editors that our writing is worth publishing. Perhaps. But perhaps, too, we should heed Zinsser's final piece of advice:

*Writing well means believing in your writing and believing in yourself, taking risks, daring to be different, pushing yourself to excel. You will write only as well as you make yourself write.*

(ibid., p. 302)

This, too, looks like good advice but it also looks hard to follow.

## Part Two: Writing a Lot

*...to be a writer you have to be present at your work every day, whether you finally write something or not.*

(Richard Ford, 2007)

In order to improve our writing, to write well, we students, teachers and researchers should shift away from producing 'sterile, voiceless academic prose' towards scholarly writing which is 'warm, inviting and intensely personal'. We also need to see rewriting as a way of simplifying our original texts, especially by clearing out the clutter we inevitably create. Writing well is, though, a hard process which requires us to push ourselves in order to excel (see Part One).

Writing well is one thing. Writing a lot is another. We were fortunate, I think, in getting Zinsser's advice on writing well (Zinsser, 2006) and we are also lucky to get some recent advice on writing a lot (Silvia, 2007). Silvia's overall aim is to help make us reflective and disciplined writers by becoming more active in planning our work, in setting clear goals, in monitoring what we do, in rewarding ourselves and in building good habits. He wants us to muzzle the 'inner writer' within us in order to unleash the 'outer writer'. In other words, he urges us to 'write like a normal human being, not like a poet and certainly not like a psychologist' (ibid., pp. 3-7). And he actually *is* a psychologist and his book is published by the American Psychological Association. So, he and they should know.

Silvia's main suggestions for helping us to write productively are to make writing an everyday process, to adopt strategies for writing during the normal working week, to write with less stress and guilt, and to write more efficiently (ibid., pp. xi-xii). I discuss these suggestions under five headings derived from his *How to Write a Lot: Specious Barriers, Motivational Tools, Writers' Block, Group Support and Style*. Here again, as in Part One, I review the ideas contained in one book by linking them with the work of other writers drawn from a range of subject areas.

### Specious Barriers

We know that writing is hard but, for personal and professional reasons, many of us want to write a lot more than we currently do. And we usually claim that there are real barriers preventing us from writing a lot. Silvia argues that the four main obstacles we most often cite are specious rather than sound. The most frequent of these is the **time barrier**: 'we can't *find* time to write' or 'we would write more if only we could *find* big blocks of time'. The time barrier is quite comforting – it reassures us that we and our colleagues could write a lot more if only conditions weren't always against us. But time is a specious barrier because we can never *find* it: 'finding time is a destructive way of thinking about writing'. Instead, we should *allot* time to write: 'prolific writers make a schedule and stick to it'. The secret is the *regularity of our writing* not the number of days or hours we write.

We should just schedule a time which suits us. Silvia writes every weekday between 8am and 10am. Instead of adopting a wasteful *binge writing* strategy, we should ensure that we write in regular, self-allotted time slots. And we should defend these writing slots against all-comers just as we protect our teaching slots, or as we are supposed to preserve our meeting slots. We can learn to say no: 'making a schedule and sticking to it is the only way. There is no other way to write a lot' (Silvia, 2007, pp. 11-18).

Silvia confirms what other writers also say. As noted in Part One, Zinsser stresses the same point: 'the only way to learn to write is to *force* yourself to produce a *certain number of words* on a *regular* basis' (Zinsser, 2006, p. 49, my italics). I know that Ron Barnett – an enviably prolific writer on higher education – writes every evening for an hour before he goes home, because I asked him. Another simply states 'writers are people who write. If you need a place to begin, begin there...you apply ass to chair' (Rhodes, 1995, p. 3). Actually, we don't even need a chair – Hemingway, with a bad ass, a bad back and a bad head, often wrote standing up.

We would all like more time for writing but very few of us are given large chunks – even sabbaticals – by our institutions. Instead, we must make the best use of short bursts of writing, since that's all most of us will get or be able to allot. Such short bursts can be productive if they are regularly scheduled into a writing strategy. Successful *short burst* writers learn to organise their writing under clear headings, sub-headings and sections so that they can then use their 15, 30, or 60-minute slots efficiently and effectively. Longer sessions – days, weeks, writing retreats, if we can get them – can obviously help us focus more intensively on writing projects and should help our writing and rewriting flourish. However, just as some sessions may be too short for pursuing an idea effectively, so long sessions may become tedious and unproductive (see Murray & Moore, 2006, pp. 14-17). The main advice, however, is clear: we could all write a lot more if we allot regular slots.

The second barrier, or excuse for not writing, is another ***I need more*** argument: more analysis, more data, more articles. This argument is used by binge writers who are also binge readers and binge statisticians. The bad habits that stop bingers writing also stop them doing their preliminary reading and reviewing. The main way to counter the argument and the bad habit is to suggest that such writers need to see their literature reviews, analyses and descriptions of research methods as vital components of the academic writing process. And as integral parts, they are worthy of taking up scheduled writing time. Again, it is not a matter of *finding more time* for more reading and more reviewing of articles. Instead, it is a matter of *using allotted time* to complete another aspect of the overall research writing task (see Silvia, 2007, pp. 18-19).

Other writers call this solution *prewriting* or *adequate preparation* or *planning* but it is, as Silvia suggests, a crucial part of the writing process. *Prewriting* is,

obviously, writing: reading and reviewing relevant literature, generating ideas, analysing data and then outlining and drafting text (Kellogg, 1994). *Adequate preparation* is a matter of showing that we have done the ground-work to enable us to enter, in an informed way, the on-going conversation about, for example, teaching and learning in higher education. Such preparation is a writing process in which we learn from and negotiate with other writers who have addressed similar issues (see Glassick et al., 1997 and Badley, 2002). *Planning* is, at times, difficult to distinguish from writing. Indeed, in qualitative research, 'plans for the final product usually begin to take shape during initial analysis' (Woods, 1999, p. 23). Woods identifies four stages in planning: a preliminary, partly systematic, partly randomised, speculative scheme; a provisional working plan; a re-worked plan at first draft stage, which may be repeated in subsequent drafts; and a final tidying-up plan (ibid.) But in our prewriting, preparation and planning for writing we must also be flexible. There must be 'a productive tension between constructive planning and anarchic, but potentially highly productive, freedom' (ibid., p. 25). Part of that productive tension is the realisation that all writing, personal and professional, also features *serendipity* as prominently as any kind of rational planning (see Bridges, 1999). But we won't do any prewriting, preparing, planning or writing unless we 'set aside daily writing time and make the lined pad or the desktop screen (our) regular companion' (Germano, 2005, p. 128).

The third specious barrier is also an 'I need' argument but this is a more desperate version entitled ***I need some better kit***. a nice chair, a new computer, a better desk, a laser printer, a room with a view? Unfortunately, 'equipment will never help you write a lot; only making a schedule and sticking to it will make you a productive writer' (see Silvia, 2007, pp. 19-23). All we actually need is pen and paper.

On the other hand, some of us do have favourite places where we think we write better. Some claim that they can only write in their own study, the university library, the coffee bar, or the pub. Others say they can write almost anywhere at any time: on the train, on a plane, on a bus, even in the street. There's a story that Thomas Hobbes walked around Paris and wrote ideas down for his *Leviathon* in a notebook. Although the standard advice is for us to find places where we feel most comfortable writing, we should also consider varying where we write. It might be more productive to write somewhere other than at our own desk: writing on a train could be liberating since we would not be tempted to stop writing in order to check our sources – we will get it written even if we don't get it right (see Cantor & Fairbairn, 2006, p. 40). Having a brand-new lightweight laptop might help though.

Specious barrier number four is the ***I can only write well when I'm inspired*** claim. Research has shown that this is both comical and irrational since waiting for inspiration just does not work. In one study those who only wrote when they felt inspired were barely more productive than those who were told not to write at

all. Further, 'forcing people to write enhanced their creative ideas for writing...Writing breeds good ideas for writing'. Struggling writers should 'get off their high horse and join the unwashed masses of real academic writers' because 'successful professional writers, regardless of whether they are writing novels, nonfiction, poetry, or drama, are prolific because they write regularly, usually every day' (see Silvia, 2007, pp. 23-27). Writing a lot, however, should not necessarily preclude a daily shower, even for busy academics. Waiting for inspiration is a bit like waiting for Godot – she, he or it might never come. So, instead of waiting, we should just get on with the job by learning and regularly practicing the craft of writing (see Palumbo, 2000, pp. 23-25). For, as one contemporary writer makes clear: 'Amateurs look for inspiration; the rest of us just get up and go to work' (Roth, 2006, p. 82).

### **Motivational Tools**

The three main tools that should help motivate us to stick to our schedules and so become more prolific as writers are: *setting goals*, *setting priorities* and *monitoring progress*. They should also help us avoid *writer's block*.

To write a lot we need to clarify our writing *goals*. People who write a lot also plan a lot. This first entails listing our *project goals* for the next three to six months, such as: revising and submitting an article, writing a chapter for a book, starting a new manuscript, and reviving a half-written paper. Silvia suggests displaying these goals clearly on a board and then, satisfyingly, crossing each one off when they have been achieved.

The second step is to set a *specific, focused, concrete goal* for each day of writing, such as: write at least 200 words; revise yesterday's first draft; write three paragraphs of the general discussion for the journal article; add missing references; brainstorm an outline for a new paper; reread reviewers' comments and begin to make appropriate changes.

But having a list of mid to long-term project goals is one thing. We also need to set our *priorities* – which goals should come first? A typical order of priorities might be: 1. checking page proofs and copyedited manuscripts; 2. finishing projects with deadlines; 3. revising manuscripts to resubmit to a journal; 4. reviewing manuscripts; 5. developing a new manuscript; 6. doing miscellaneous writing.

*Monitoring progress* is, in itself, motivational. It helps us focus on our project goals and keeps them salient. Indeed, such self-monitoring will help us sit down and write, especially if we actually note down when and what we wrote. Silvia admits to being nerdy enough to note down on a spreadsheet his daily production of words but the key issue is the tracking of progress made rather than the technology used. When we've finished a project goal we should be self-rewarding too for immediate rewards – coffee, lunch, a good bottle of something sparkling – are also motivational (see Silvia, 2007, pp. 29-45).

Good, expert or skilled writers are highly self-motivating because, amongst other things, they take their planning activities very seriously. They plan for a longer time and they do so more elaborately than do less skilled writers. They review and re-assess their plans regularly and consider the reader's point of view when planning and composing, and they revise their work in line with their global goals and plans rather than merely editing small, local segments (see Wellington, 2003, p. 39).

### **Writer's Block**

'Academic writers cannot get writer's block' because they are 'not crafting a deep narrative or composing metaphors that expose mysteries of the human heart' (Silvia, 2007, p. 45). Instead, writer's block is a dispositional fallacy: 'writer's block is nothing more than the behavior of not writing...The cure for writer's block – if you can cure a specious affliction – is writing' (ibid., pp. 45-6). So, writer's block only affects those who believe in it, whereas 'scheduled writers don't get writer's block, whatever that is' and are prolific writers because they stick to their schedule whether they feel like writing or not (ibid., p. 46).

But many academic writers, unlike Silvia, do believe in writer's block. Here's an example of a writer who became blocked not because she wanted to 'expose mysteries' but because she was afraid of failure:

*Suddenly I felt like I didn't know anything. All my confidence withered. I became hyper-critical. For every sentence I wrote, I'd think of all the reasons someone would find fault with what I said...I would be a failure* (Ely et al.1997, p. 12).

An ever-present internal critic or censor is common to many writers as they 'experience moments of self-doubt, of feeling like an imposter, of knowing that the writing doesn't communicate the intricacy and complexity of the thoughts swirling through the mind that seem to turn lackluster when put as words on paper' (ibid). We get blocked when we think we must work out, clearly and in detail, what we want to say before we can write...and get stuck as a result. We struggle to work out an idea logically or scientifically or objectively...and get stuck. We want to be sure before we write...instead of writing when we are not sure. As writers we see no end to our project...and get stuck (see Murray, 2002, p. 163).

Becoming blocked is one thing, getting over or around the block is another. How could we overcome this white-paper phobia? We could, for example:

- realise that producing acceptable writing demands much rewriting
- realise that no one process works for everybody
- just do it, just get something, anything, on paper
- write about questions, uncertainties, or contradictions in our data or sources
- look and re-look at what we have to reveal relevance and get writing
- write self-reflective memos to critique our own work

- write analytic memos on what we already have from various vantage points
- jump start our writing with an anecdote
- write a poem
- write a scene for a play that would dramatise what we are studying
- start with a critical incident (adapted from Ely et al., 1997, pp. 12-56).

Other useful suggestions to conquer the writer's block include: put down rubbish, sort it later; realise that all scholarly writing is first written by the unprepared or the under-prepared; write quick drafts; pretend to write a letter to a friend; write morsels and think of your article, book, chapter or thesis as an assembly of morsels; always carry your notebook with you (like Hobbes) and memorialise your best notions at once; conquer your natural or over-educated disdain for the garbage your mind produces; get angry and write out your anger (Watson, 1987, pp. 38-43).

Rhodes offers another valuable way of overcoming the dreaded block:

If writing a chapter is impossible, write a page.

If writing a page is impossible, write a paragraph.

If writing a paragraph is impossible, write a sentence.

If writing even a sentence is impossible, write a word and teach yourself everything there is to know about that word and write another, connected, word and see where their connection leads (Rhodes, 1995, pp. 9-10).

We might even try one or more of these eight strategies for unblocking: freewriting; generative writing; writing with a supervisor; mind-mapping; verbal rehearsal; write down all you know or all your ideas about X; construct a sense of an ending – visualise the completed work; try a combination of these strategies since no one strategy may work for you (see Murray 2002, p. 167).

Perhaps, despite Silvia, the self-doubt, the fear of failure, the hypercriticism, the loneliness, the fear of rejection and the procrastination are real symptoms of an imagined affliction. Or perhaps writer's block is instead a signpost, a harbinger, of an impending transition or passage (Palumbo, 2000, p. 17). Perhaps what feels like a block is the 'balled-up tension' that portends a new period of growth. The tension, the block, may contain various old beliefs, self-concepts, and past writing experiences that need examining if we are to grow as writers. Perhaps we fear that we are not as talented as we had hoped and that our goals as writers will always exceed our gifts. Looking at it this way we might be able to see the block for what it is, 'a self-protective mechanism', a problem 'installed' in childhood but continuing in adult life. What we call a writer's block may well be a defence mechanism where we shut down emotionally and suppress our creative instincts in order to avoid the risk of self-exposure and of shameful humiliation. What we need to do is to give ourselves a break, to realise that we can write not despite our writer's block but because of it (see Palumbo, 2000, pp. 17-18).

One of the main suggestions Palumbo makes for helping the writer is the adoption of a buddy system, for 'what every writer needs is a buddy' (ibid., p. 27). The buddy system provides support for learning new skills and facing new tasks. A buddy for the writer would offer clarity in difficult situations, would tell us when we are wrong or out of line, would provide a strong bullshit detector, and would help us feel less alone. For a writer, such a buddy would provide a long-term, creative, emotional and intellectual relationship (see Palumbo, 2000, pp. 26-28). A different way of putting this is to recommend that all academic writers need a critical friend.

Other suggestions made by Palumbo for overcoming the writer's block are for us to realise: that 'writing begets writing'; that bad writing is inevitable but, like manure, is good for growth; that all writing is autobiographical and reveals who we are; that sometimes we should get out of the way and let the writing happen; that even if we can't be John Updike we can be better writers; that we can fight against that harsh and persistent inner critic who belittles our work; that we can come to see rejection not as personal but as another way of helping us to make our growth as writers our main goal; that writing carries no guarantees and is all about risk; that nothing invigorates our writing like looking at the world with fresh eyes; that writing is like running a marathon in that it requires commitment, delayed gratification, endurance, and will-power; that all writers struggle; and that as a writer you are enough (see Palumbo, 2000, pp. 35-241).

Finally, Murray maintains that blocked writers construct their own cages. The way out of our own cage is to see and use writing differently. It is through writing that our cage can be opened (Murray, 2002, p. 169). So whether we are in Murray's cage or facing Palumbo's psychological block, there is one main exhortation: 'So go. Write' (Palumbo, 2000, p. 241).

### **Group Support**

Joining or forming a *writing group* is one of the best ways of reinforcing our good habits and of stopping us from falling back into bad habits such as binge writing. Silvia discusses the **Agraphia Group** he helped set up at the University of North Carolina to give staff a chance to talk about their writing projects, to share ideas and insights about writing, to help one another set reasonable goals but, mainly, to overcome 'the pathologic loss of the ability to write' (Silvia, 2007, p. 51).

Silvia provides five main guidelines for the writing group:

- (1) *set concrete, short-term goals* because such proximal goal-setting enhances motivation. The group needs to commit to meeting these goals before their next meeting: 'make an outline for my paper'; 'write the general discussion'; 'write at least 1000 words';
- (2) *monitor the group's progress* by writing down each member's goals in a folder and then stating at the start of each meeting (each week or fortnight) whether they have been met;
- (3) *stick to writing goals* rather than other professional goals;

- (4) *re-inforce good writing habits* with informal social rewards – buy the good writers coffee and motivate the bad ones with electric shocks (only joking);
- (5) *have different groups for staff and students* – they usually have different writing priorities and face different challenges and struggles.

Writing groups for academics have a relatively long history in the USA (see Gere, 1987) but are not, until recently, much in evidence in the UK. Instead, such groups are more likely to be suggested for students who wish to improve their writing. For example, I once suggested that, following my reading of a research report from Harvard, teachers should encourage students to form groups to read and discuss the essays of their classmates:

*Where students in groups actually do comment on each other's work, as at Harvard, the students "rave" about the benefits.*

(Badley, 1993, p. 4)

In the same paper I referred to Peter Elbow's *teacherless writing class*:

*It is a class of seven to twelve people. It meets at least once a week. Everyone reads everyone else's writing. Everyone tries to give each writer a sense of how his words were experienced. The goal is for the writer to come as close as possible to being able to see and experience his own words through seven or more people. That's all.*

(Elbow, 1973, quoted in Badley, 1993, p. 5)

A similar approach can, of course, be adopted by academics forming their own groups such as the one described in Olson (1995). Here, writing is seen as both *self-development and self-refinement*, whilst the role of members is to provide what they regarded as continual *realworld* feedback. Writing groups are not just a way of improving the writer and her compositional skills but as a way of actually *existing in the academy*. This particular all-women writing group was seen by its originator as an essential force in pushing her forward as a writer and was a continuous source of support in the otherwise lonely process of composition. Her group met every two or three weeks in members' houses rather than in the university itself, and they didn't read material in advance but considered it on the day. Usually only two pieces of writing were considered for one hour each. People asked for the kind of feedback they wanted or asked questions they wanted the group to answer.

An early British initiative was promoted in order to enable academics to improve and increase their written output; to develop an incremental rather than bingeing writing process, an approach based on the assumption that productive writing is more likely to be sustained and routine if it is conducted frequently as part of the academic's regular professional life; to let academics review and adapt their writing processes over six months with support from colleagues acting as critical friends through dialogue; and to change attitudes to writing by increasing

enjoyment and removing blocks (see Murray & MacKay, 1998, pp. 1-2). A more recent discussion of writing groups is provided in Murray & Moore (2006, pp. 109-127) and this includes such useful suggestions as describing writing projects to one another, initially working with a facilitator, doing some writing during each meeting, giving and receiving feedback, and reviewing the group at a specified meeting (ibid., pp. 126-7).

An Australian example may be described as a research development model (see Lee & Boud, 2003). Their rationale was that of using writing groups as a strategy for research development, creating a new culture of research, scholarship and scholarly writing, allaying academic fear and anxiety about writing, promoting writing as pleasurable and satisfying, developing academic identity, and demystifying the process of writing and getting published. The process involved forming groups of between six and sixteen new or relatively inexperienced writers, meeting either fortnightly or weekly for two hours each time over a period of two years (for new writers), or one semester (for writers with a little experience of publication), encouraging peer feedback and critique of draft texts, including conference presentations and articles for publication, focusing on questions of academic identity, the know-how of writing for publication, the practice of writing, the discourse of writing, including genre, rhetoric and the grammar of academic English, writing during sessions to build confidence and to produce texts for further work between meetings. The principles that informed the groups were those of promoting mutuality as a rich peer relationship based on the shared common project of scholarly writing, seeing research development through writing as part of the normal business of the academic life, and developing the identity of academics as scholarly writers. The reported outcomes included improved writing and research skills, less fear and anxiety about writing and more pleasure and satisfaction, changed and enriched academic identity and institutional culture, and success in producing material for publication.

In a report on groups I had convened I concluded that, as learning communities, they should encourage: a safe *democratic* setting for sharing ideas, *engagement with* the writing process, *growth* as scholar-writers, *organisational change (towards a culture of scholarship and writing)*, and should provide *critical and supportive feedback* about one another's writing. Writing groups may also be seen as communities of practice that provide a theoretical framework of *critical conversation* about 'a joint enterprise' (Wenger, 1998), *dialectical tension* between action (writing) and reflection (critique), *insights* into 'a shared repertoire' (Wenger, 1998), 'mutual engagement' (Wenger, 1998) and 'a sharing of the culture' (Bruner, 2002), as well as *transformation* into (*identities* as) scholar-writers. They should also help university teachers become more *critical readers* of all educational texts, become *critical writers* of their own texts and become more *self-critical* about their own educational practice.

Of course, groups may also become problematic when group loyalty exerts *pressure to conform* to core beliefs and values, when they *limit individual*

*autonomy*, when group leaders or factions seek *power and control over others* and when the *rhetoric of community* replaces actual criticism, dissent and scepticism. They can be successful when they help strike a balance between *autonomy* and *connectedness* (Bruner, 2002), when they increase teachers' *autonomy* (*ability* and *freedom*) to write as they see it, and when they use *connectedness* (*community* and *mutuality*) to help teachers grow and 'keep becoming' (Miller, 1988) as scholar-writers (see Badley, 2005).

Overall, the main benefits to members of writing groups are that they constructively pressure binge writers to make and keep to their schedules and that they provide positive reinforcement for those with good writing habits (see Silvia, 2007, pp. 51-57).

### **Style**

Zinsser's comments on style (see Part One) may be summarised as: be yourself, write as a person (even as an 'I') and pay attention to sentences. Silvia echoes much of this. He, too, argues that 'academic journals radiate bad writing' because, first of all, academics try to sound smart by using words like *erudite* and *sophisticated* instead of, well, *smart*. Second, they usually have bad role models – other academics. Third – they don't spend enough time writing to become good writers. So, we have to revise our model of academic writing by becoming less impenetrable and obtuse, less shoddy and pretentious, and this means we must practice a lot more (Silvia, 2007, pp. 59-76).

Silvia offers three other bits of advice. First, we should choose good – short, expressive and familiar – words rather than trendy intellectual-sounding phrases and those which make us sound like academic psychologists. Of course, we should use good scientific and technical terms but avoid bad words imported from business, marketing, politics and warfare: *incentivise*, *target* and *transparent*. Psychologists (and not just psychologists) love bad words, although they would rather use *deficient* or *suboptimal* rather than *bad*. He suggests we use *a person* and *people* rather than *an individual* or *individuals*, and *children*, *teachers* and *parents* rather than *participants*. We should drop *very*, *quite*, *basically*, *actually*, *virtually*, *extremely*, *remarkably*, *completely*, *at all* since they are *parasitic intensifiers* (ibid., pp. 61-65). Second, we should write strong sentences. Instead, 'academics scorn clear, simple sentences'. Third, we should avoid passive, limp and wordy phrases. As academics we want to sound smart and so we drift towards the passive voice. We think it sounds impersonal and scholarly. We write that results are indicative of significance, that the theory is reflective of its historical context and that the data are supportive of the hypothesis. We suffer from 'ivving it up' (ibid., pp. 71-75). And we should remember that *there are only two things wrong with current academic writing – style and substance* (see Rhode, 2006).

### **Writing a Lot Better?**

In Part One I concluded that Zinsser's advice should help us to write well by learning to write with respect to the language and to our readers. Will Silvia's advice help us write a lot more? And will the two sets of advice help us write a lot and write better?

What, then, are the key lessons from '**How to Write a Lot**'? First, we need to *schedule regular slots* for writing rather than try to find time for writing. And we need to *defend* these writing slots with vigour. Saying 'no' to those who would steal writing time is a useful strategy. Second, we should not wait for inspiration: writing generates ideas. Third, setting, clarifying, prioritising and monitoring our project and daily goals are important if we want to write a lot. Fourth, writers who allot time for writing and then get on with achieving their daily goals don't get writer's block. Fifth, critical friends, especially in a writing group, can help support the writer who wants to write. Sixth, we should aim to write in a clear, direct style by using good plain words and simple yet strong sentences.

Overall, however, perhaps the best piece of advice from both Silvia and Zinsser is that we academics would all write a lot better if we wrote as professionals whilst, at the same time, tried to sound like normal people with something worthwhile to say.

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