

# Conducting a Personal Intensive Writing Experience (IWE)

An Intensive Writing Experience (IWE) is an event in which a writer makes a concerted effort both to make progress on a document and to become a better writer. During an IWE, you set aside a predetermined amount of time that is used to make progress on a particular writing project (such as a dissertation). The time is also used to improve your writing by learning new skills and trying out new strategies and writing habits. Unlike IWEs facilitated by tutors in the Purdue Writing Lab, a personal IWE is conducted on your own instead of with a group. All the lessons and materials you need are available here on the Purdue OWL.

Conducting your own IWE means that you lose some of the accountability of people expecting you to show up in person every day, and you also lose the dedicated working space that is different than where you write in normal life. Writing alone, especially at home, can also mean that you must contend with distractions such as small children or housework. In addition to guidance on planning your IWE, this handout offers some tips for how to get the most out of a personal IWE while working around potential distractions.

## Setting a Schedule

Choose a schedule that works for your life. Our in-person events are typically three full days, 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM. Working three consecutive days has the benefit of building momentum and creating a writing routine that you can continue once your personal IWE has concluded. If your circumstances do not allow for such concentrated time, you might schedule a single day session or several half-day sessions. The material here will help that time to be productive.

*The most important thing to note is this: No matter what sort of schedule you set up, be sure to set goals for the overall event and also for each individual writing time.*

## Proposed 3-Day Schedule

Set aside 3 consecutive days in a single week—for example, Tuesday through Thursday, or Saturday through Monday. Set a daily work schedule that looks something like this:

9:00-9:45 am:	Mini-lesson on writing
9:45-10:00 am:	Set goals for a two-hour writing session
10:00 am-12:00 pm:	Write. Be sure to silence your phone and turn off email, etc., notifications.
12:00-12:15 pm:	Debrief the session—how many of your goals did you accomplish?
12:15-1:15 pm:	Lunch break. Get some exercise, check email, chat with family or friends.
1:15-2:00 pm:	Mini-lesson on writing.

- 2:00-2:15 pm: Set goals for a two-hour writing session  
 2:15-4:15 pm: Write. Be sure to silence your phone and turn off email, etc., notifications.  
 4:15-4:30 pm: Debrief the session and take a few minutes to revise tomorrow's goals.

### Adjusting the 3-Day Schedule

The most basic building blocks of an IWE are these:

- Setting goals for the session (15 minutes)
- Writing time (2 hours)
- Debriefing the time—what did you accomplish and what will you do next? (15 minutes)

If you need to adjust the 3-day schedule to fit your circumstances, think in terms of a minimum of 2.5 hour blocks, if possible. Adding in a mini-lesson requires another 30-45 minutes. So, for instance, a single, bare minimum, half-day, personal IWE might involve setting goals from 1:00-1:15, writing from 1:15-3:15, and debriefing from 3:15-3:30. You might also use this sort of format to structure regularly-scheduled weekly or daily writing times apart from an IWE.

As you think about how to plan your personal IWE, keep in mind that the shorter your personal IWE is the less you will accomplish on your current writing project. Writers who dedicate the full three days to a personal IWE have been known to produce ten thousand words or to revise an entire chapter of a dissertation in those three days.

### Topics and Materials

All vidcasts and handouts for the IWE mini-lessons are available on the Purdue OWL. The grid here offers the topic order that we use with our three-day, in-person IWE events. You may adjust the order to fit your own needs, but we do suggest that you start with setting goals.

	<b>Morning</b>	<b>Afternoon</b>
<b>Day 1</b>	<i>Setting Goals &amp; Maintaining Motivation</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vidcast: Setting Goals &amp; Maintaining Motivation</li> <li>• Goal Setting for your Personal Intensive Writing Experience</li> <li>• Scholarly Writing Inventory</li> <li>• Staying Productive for Long Writing Tasks</li> </ul>	<i>Ways to Approach Revision<sup>1</sup></i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vidcast: Ways to Approach Revision</li> <li>• Quick Tips for Revising</li> </ul>
<b>Day 2</b>	<i>Genre Analysis &amp; Reverse Outlining</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vidcast: Genre Analysis &amp; Reverse Outlining</li> <li>• Genre Analysis</li> <li>• Introductions: Organization &amp; the CARS Model</li> <li>• Reverse Outlining</li> <li>• Creating a Database of Templates</li> </ul>	<i>Sentence-Level Writing &amp; Concision</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vidcast: Sentences: Types, Variety, Concision</li> <li>• Sentence Types</li> <li>• Sentence Combining</li> <li>• Writing Concisely</li> <li>• Sentence Concision Activity</li> </ul>

<b>Day 3</b>	<i>Paragraph-Level Writing &amp; Flow</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vidcast: Paragraph Organization &amp; Flow</li> <li>• Common Patterns of Paragraph Organization</li> <li>• Flow in Scholarly Writing</li> <li>• Transition Words</li> </ul>	<i>Punctuation<sup>2</sup></i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vidcast: Punctuation</li> <li>• The Meaning of Punctuation</li> <li>• Taming Commas</li> </ul>
--------------	--	--

## Pre-Event Preparations

- **Set a schedule.** How many days will you work? How many hours per day will you dedicate to this? The original material for the thesis and dissertation IWE assumed 3 days of work, for about 8 hours each day, but you can adjust that to fit your availability and needs.
- **Choose a space** to dedicate for IWE work and try to work there during all your sessions. If possible, this should be a space separate from other normal household or work activities. A door to close the room off is always nice, when it can be managed.
- **Prepare the space in advance.** Be sure you have all the necessary electronics (laptop, charging cords, etc.), books, articles, scratch paper, pens & pencils, etc. You don't want to have to waste writing time by looking for that one item you forgot to have ready. Because your workspace can affect your state of mind, consider cleaning and organizing it ahead of time. By doing so, you may find yourself in a more focused, positive frame of mind.
- **Clear your mental space** by taking care of necessary life tasks prior to your event. This includes things like errands, bill-paying, phone calls, etc. If you can complete these before the IWE starts, they will not be mental distractions while you are trying to write.
- **Make arrangements for childcare** in whatever manner works for your situation. If you will need to supervise children yourself during this time, see the Caring for Children section.
- **Check the OWL** to be sure you have access to all the materials. Download the handouts for the topics you plan to use so that you have them even if you lose internet connection.

## Daily Preparations

- **Collect personal comfort supplies** like coffee, tea, water bottles, snacks, sweater, etc. so that you do not have to interrupt your writing time to go find them.
- **Silence your phone** and, ideally, put it in a drawer in another room so that you aren't tempted to multitask between your IWE and answering texts or DMs on social media.<sup>3</sup>
- **Ensure that you have all the necessary working supplies** you'll need for the day's work.
- **Take care of any needs a child has** (snack, toileting, going down for a nap, etc.) or a pet has (feeding or watering, litter box or going outside, etc.).

## Avoiding Physical and Mental Distress While Working

- Make your environment, mood, and resources more conducive to writing and productivity.
  - Open your curtains if it's a sunny day. You might even follow the sunlight throughout the day and work wherever you get the most natural light. Work outside if weather permits.
  - Avoid aches from prolonged sitting and being hunched over a keyboard. If you can, alternate between spaces that allow you to work in different positions—one for sitting and one for standing, for example.
  - Work away from your screen occasionally. This gives your eyes a break, and you'll be less distracted by the internet.
    - For reading and proofreading tasks, consider printing material and working on paper. Research suggests that physical paper is better for comprehension than a screen and that proofreading tends to be more accurate.<sup>4</sup>
    - For outlining or brainstorming work, consider using paper, post-it notes, or a whiteboard.
- Make the most of physical writing materials.
  - Post-it notes can help you keep track of your research by serving as annotated bookmarks/references for physical sources (articles, books, etc.).
  - Different colored highlighters can help you color-code concerns and themes as you review and revise a section of writing such as a dissertation chapter.
  - A whiteboard is an excellent tool for outlining and brainstorming your thoughts.
  - Stickers can contribute to the sense of a job well done.

## Break Times

- Make a plan. When and how often will you take a break while writing? What will you do during that time? Some people take a very short break every half hour or so; others work for a longer time before pausing.
- Stick to your plan; don't use breaks as a procrastination tool.
  - If you are stymied in your writing and it is not yet time to take a break, switch to a different writing task that allows you to still make progress without undue frustration.
  - If you are unable to meet your goals, revisit them to be sure they are specific and focused enough to accomplish in a given time.
- Use breaks for stretching, snacks, a drink of water, checking email or phone messages (keep this under control, though), or checking in with children.

## Caring for Children

It can be difficult to conduct a personal IWE if you have no one to watch your children while you work. These suggestions may make it possible for you to concentrate on your writing during the time you schedule for a personal IWE. Not all of them will work for all children, and you know your children best. So use what works and ignore the rest.<sup>5</sup>

- Activities that might help children play independently
  - Write/illustrate a story to share with you when you are on a break.
  - Write/illustrate a letter to someone.
  - Play with a new toy that is reserved for use during your writing time. You might also just have a box with several different new things, and they can pick one during each writing time.
  - Phone a relative who is willing to talk for a while.
  - Have a special snack time sitting next to you while you work.
  - Create a daily goal sheet for them where they get a sticker for every X minutes they let you work alone and then after Y stickers they get a treat of some kind. X & Y should be based on age and what motivates them.
- Things to think about with younger children
  - Make full use of their normal schedules. You may have to shift your IWE components so that you are writing during nap time, for instance.
  - Change your schedule. Skip normal household work (like laundry or grocery shopping or even cooking) so that during these few days your “work time” can be spent on IWE and writing and your “free time” can be spent with the children.
  - Let them join you when possible. If children need to sit on your lap, let them. Shift to working on something (such as reading an article or proofreading a section) that might allow for that.
- Things to think about with older children
  - Make full use of their normal schedule. Your IWE times can be structured to match their schoolwork times, for instance.
  - Allow a special treat like a movie or extra time playing video games.
  - Involve them in the process. Ask them to read over pages as you finish or ask them to be your official timer and word-count keeper. Set them up with a stopwatch and a chart where they enter your starting word count and ending word count.
  - Enlist their help. Explain what you need from them in order to be successful during these days (e.g., for them to play independently for X hours) and have them suggest what they need in order to be able to help you meet those goals (e.g., extra books from the library, a new movie, a promise of a fun family treat at the end of the day, etc).
- Things to think about with all ages
  - Sometimes proximity is all that is needed. Set up your writing room to allow them to be in your company while working on their own things.
  - Make wise use of your breaks. Spend time with the children and let them help you celebrate your goals every time you take a break.
  - Get some exercise. Use breaks to run around the block or shoot a few baskets with the kids.
  - If all else fails, give up on IWE for the day and enjoy your children. They really do grow up too fast and, at the end of the day, you’ll likely regret missing those moments with

them more than missing a day of writing. You can try again tomorrow (or even tonight, once everyone is in bed).

## **Adjusting a Personal IWE to Accommodate a Group**

If you have some friends or co-workers who wish to join you for an IWE, you can easily adjust your plans to accommodate the group format. You'll want to think about the following aspects of conducting your group event:

- Set up accountability. Share your goals with one another in advance of each writing session, and debrief with one another after writing. Knowing that you will have to confess to not getting much done can be a powerful incentive to accomplish a lot. If your group will meet virtually, you might consider using a shared document, like a Google Doc, to keep track of goals. If you are meeting in person, you might list them on a whiteboard that everyone can see.
- Talk about writing. View the mini-lesson vidcasts and then talk over the material as a group, or try out the suggested activities as a group.
- Write together. If you plan to write in person, think about how to set up the space to accommodate everyone's needs (e.g., whiteboards, outlets, temperature controls). If you plan to write virtually using a video call, decide whether you will turn cameras off or leave them on while you write. Turning them off removes distraction. Leaving them on fosters accountability. In either case, you'll want to mute your microphones during writing time.
- Take time to relax together. Spend at least a little time just being friendly with one another. This might happen over lunch or for the first few minutes of the day. The more you feel happy to get together with this group, the easier it will be to show up and work.

1 If you are revising for clarity, see Gopen, G., & Swan, J. (2018, January 1). The science of scientific writing. *American Scientist*. <https://www.americanscientist.org/blog/the-long-view/the-science-of-scientific-writing>

2 Wondering about using the Oxford comma? See Stokel-Walker, C. (2018, July 23). The commas that cost companies millions. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20180723-the-commas-that-cost-companies-millions>

3 To find out more about how multitasking decreases productivity, see the following articles:  
Multitasking: Switching costs. (2006, March 20). *American Psychology Association*.

<https://www.apa.org/research/action/multitask>

Bradberry, T. (2014, October 8). Multitasking damages your brain and career, new studies suggest. *Forbes*.  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/travisbradberry/2014/10/08/multitasking-damages-your-brain-and-career-new-studies-suggest/#5dcdf356ee>.

4 To find out more about the benefits of proofreading on paper copies, see the following articles:

Barshay, J. (2019, August 12). Evidence increases for reading on paper instead of screens. *The Hechinger Report*. <https://hechingerreport.org/evidence-increases-for-reading-on-paper-instead-of-screens/>

Stockton, N. (2014, August 12). What's up with that: Why it's so hard to catch your own typos. *Wired*.  
<https://www.wired.com/2014/08/wuwt-typos/>.

5 For more information on how to occupy children while working from home, see Kamenetz, A., & Turner, C. (2020, June 22). Kids know how to occupy themselves. We need to let them do it. *NPR*.  
<https://www.npr.org/2020/06/18/880584874/kids-know-how-to-occupy-themselves-we-need-to-let-them-do-it>.