

Staying Productive for Long Writing Tasks

As writers who need to make meaningful progress on our projects, it is important that we stay focused, motivated, and productive for extended periods of time. However, writing can also prove very challenging. Fortunately, there are practical tips and tools that can help us tackle some common challenges of writing as well as stay productive.

Writing is more than just writing

When we think about writing, we often see the product itself: the words on the page. It is important to remember that the words on the page are only the product of a long process of idea-generating, thinking, researching, and talking with others. All of that stuff that leads up to the initial act of putting words on a page is part of the writing process, and it should be accounted for in your time spent “writing.” What’s more, final drafts of your writing tend to follow on the heels of some amount of revising, editing, and proofreading, all of which should also be included in your time spent “writing.”

Emotional Awareness and Writing

Finding the motivation to write for extended periods of time can be tough. Even then, there may be negative emotional hurdles associated with writing. You might feel anxious, for example, which can lead to procrastination and poor time-management. The first step to overcoming such challenges is emotional awareness—recognizing the negative feelings you have toward writing.¹ While merely acknowledging those feelings may help, from there you can also investigate why you have those emotions, and then proceed to address their causes.

Perhaps you feel anxious about a writing task because it appears large, intimidating, and intractable. This would help to explain any procrastination: we naturally try to avoid scary tasks. However, this emotional awareness presents an opportunity to address the problem. Things may not seem so daunting if you divide that big, intimidating goal into smaller, more manageable pieces. Those smaller goals should accord with what you can reasonably expect to accomplish in a given time frame.² The methods listed below can help you make writing productivity a habit, and doing that can help you overcome even emotional hurdles associated with writing.

Methods for Staying Productive

Time-Based Methods

Dedicate a set amount of time for a certain writing task. Identify when you are most likely to write (or when you are the most productive), and how long you think you can sustain productive output. Reserve that time in your weekly schedule—do not sacrifice it for meetings or other work. This is your time to write. Ideally, for longer projects, this would be at least one hour up to five times per week. Use this time to write, but also to read, research, think, and edit. You might also divide up this time into shorter units, each with its own short task. Take a break as necessary between accomplishing the shorter tasks, but continue working until your scheduled writing time is finished.

1 A good place to start is by filling out the Writing Lab’s Scholarly Writing Inventory handout.

2 For further details on this, consult the Writing Lab’s Goal-Setting vidcast and handout.

Social-Based Methods

Find a social means to accomplish your writing tasks. For example, ask colleagues or peers who are working on similar projects to form a writing group. Most writing groups either 1) write together or 2) write separately and come together to read and comment on each other's drafts. Some do both. A writing group can be a time commitment, but it is often the most productive use of time, since you regularly get feedback on your writing.

You might also utilize a writing center or private writing tutor. Use your campus writing center or a private writing tutor to help you stay accountable and give one-on-one feedback on your ideas and work. There is usually a limit to how many appointments you can make at a campus writing center per week, so ask and make it a goal to make as many appointments as possible for your schedule. Make it your goal to bring at least 2-5 new pages of writing to each appointment.

Output-Based Methods

Assign yourself a reasonable daily word count goal, such as 300 words per day. Attaining this word count daily will really make the pages you write add up quickly. Your goal should also indicate the caliber of this writing. If you're at the beginning of a project, you might aim for a very rough draft of 300 words. If you've already done a lot of thinking and research, you might aim for 300 polished words per day. If you start writing one day and find yourself with a lot of momentum, there is no need to stop at 300 words. See how far you get and then consider whether you should revise your daily word goal upwards.

Reward-Based Methods³

Reward yourself for completing a suitable writing task. Rewards can be small—checking items off a list or giving yourself a sticker for accomplishing a task. A larger reward might be a favorite snack, an episode of your favorite Netflix show, a half-hour of gaming, or some money towards that wish-list item you've been wanting. You may find that rewards keep you motivated and create good habits.

You might also try creating a reward system for long-term writing projects. For instance, make a chart and give yourself 1 sticker for each day you meet your time- or output-based goal, where 2 consecutive stickers earn you a Starbucks coffee and 10 consecutive stickers earn you a new book.

Mixed Methods

The above methods and examples are not mutually exclusive. You might try adapting a feature of one method you like and combine it with another. Mix and match to find what works best for you.

For example, you can design a competitive writing challenge with a group of friends (*social method*). Collectively decide on the length of the challenge and the metrics for winning, such as highest word count (*output method*) or most hours spent writing (*time method*). It can be a just-for-fun challenge, or you might include some stakes (*rewards method*). Maybe everyone pays \$5 to enter, and the winner is awarded all the cash.

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3 The ideas here are from Mitch Hobza.