What I Learned About Writing by Not

Author: [Rebecca A. Adelman](https://www.rebeccaaadelman.com)

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All is not lost. What I have lacked in tangible productivity over my long season of writer's block (which seems finally to be limping its way to a close), I have gained in new understandings of the intricacies of my writing process and the fussy mechanics of getting words on the page.

When you aren't getting words on the page, it's crazy annoying (at best) to hear about people that are. And it's similarly unpleasant to receive unsolicited suggestions about how to get yourself unstuck. As if it was simply a matter of will or ergonomics or mental hygiene. But if it was that easy, anyone could do it. Producing good work, and doing it well, takes more than that. So here are a few things I figured out about being productive when I was struggling to produce anything at all. It's an open letter, of sorts, to my writerly self – the "I" is me, and so is the "you." But the "you" can also be, you know, *you*, if you are reading this and wanting to reconsider your writing praxis.

Become attuned to your limits.

It's hard to tune out the constant drone of academic meta-commentary about how much (or, from the occasional maverick, how little) we work. And it helps to know that most of those aggrandizing self-reports are [bullshit](). But even still, focusing too much on what other people are doing, or not, just leaves me insecure, or anxious, or envious. So spend less time worrying about what other people are doing and focus on your own patterns. Then figure out how you work, and be honest about whether all the hours you spend "working" are actually that. For example, I've figured out that I'm neither efficient nor terribly lucid after dinner, and that even

when I go back to work late in the evening, I'm not getting much done besides maybe assuaging my guilt about not working enough.

Diminishing returns are a thing. So consider whether you might be better served by reinvesting those mediocre or largely symbolic work hours elsewhere.

Figure out how you want the experience of writing to feel.

Turns out, there are no extra points for suffering. Or if they are, they circulate in an economy that is wildly unrewarding. Like the counters where you redeem your tickets at arcades: a small fortune in tokens and hours spent playing Skeeball leave you with an armload of little cardboard rectangles and the teenager in charge of the whole operation barely acknowledges you when you come to select your prize and it ends up that all you can afford is a pencil case. Anyway.

Few of us have the luxury, presumably, to only write when it feels good. Deadlines, tenure, promotion, &c. But unless you produce your best work in the throes of abject misery, experiment with the novel practice of setting your writing aside when writing feels terrible. We all have different thresholds for 'terrible,' and that terrible feeling might be mental or physical, but when you encounter that threshold, I think it's smart to heed it. Admittedly, I am still relatively new to the routine of being a peer-reviewer, but I have not yet encountered a reviewer questionnaire instructing me to give special consideration to a project if I think the author cried a lot (A LOT) while they composed it. And if there are people who will give you extra credit for your anguish, think carefully about whether you want to play by that set of rules.

Spend some time thinking about how it feels when you are doing your best work. Maybe you feel focused, or excited, or peaceful, or maybe you're so in it that you don't feel anything at all. Take advantage of those times, figure out how to increase their frequency if possible, develop strategies for doing good-enough work in circumstances that only approximate them. And otherwise: leave it alone.

Work at a pace that's sustainable.

Pretty much every academic I know, including me, is overcommitted. There are lots of reasons for this, both individual and structural. Obviously, everybody will define "overcommitted" in their own ways, and experience being overcommitted idiosyncratically. I'll need to figure out, eventually, why I have a tendency to hoard projects, but here's what I know for now: I tend to overestimate the amount of time that I have before a deadline, while underestimating how much work I will want to put into a given project. Part of me also imagines that the asteroid will surely hit between now and whatever deadline so it won't actually matter.

I can manage the consequences of my over- and underestimating (as well as the general paucity of asteroids) fairly well under normal circumstances. But when shit, inevitably happens, that mismatch becomes acutely untenable.

So: try to plan out your projects and commitments, as best as you are able, so that they align with how busy you want to be, and when, while also maintaining an overall mode of existence that is tolerable. (Parenthetically, I think academics ought to aspire to existences that are more than tolerable, and break the habit of postponing tolerability until the summer.) Not all of this is in your control, of course, so another part of writing and working well is, I think, accepting that those plans won't always pan out. And leave a margin for catastrophes, great and small. If your whole writing scheme is contingent on you never getting a flat tire / your kid never getting sick / you never getting called for jury duty / no one you love ever needing you or dying, it probably isn't going to work for you long-term.

Consider what it's worth to you.

Because we are all, alas, constrained by the laws of time and space, doing one thing generally means not doing another (or half-doing two things at once). Try to be cognizant of the trade-offs your writing affords and requires of you. Be honest about whether the potential rewards actually appeal to you, and your values. And then consider the costs, and whether they're

acceptable. With a few exceptions, I am generally fine to sacrifice binge-watching for writing. And sometimes I feel very okay opting out of being social so I can stay in and work. But on the other hand, it's almost never worth it to me – though it used to be – to trade work for sleep, or healthy food, or exercise. Maybe your non-negotiable stuff is different. The point is to figure out what that non-negotiable stuff is, and protect it … otherwise work will eat it all.

Detach from the outcome.

Beyond doing your best to make your ideas intelligible and your style engaging, you can't control how people will respond to your writing. Consider your audience, but don't obsess about them, and learn the difference between wanting to connect with your readers and needing to charm and trap them into your ways of seeing and thinking. Efforts to engineer reader reactions almost never generate better writing, and are much more likely to result in arguments that overreach or result to pedantry, while the fixation with impressing your audiences will ultimately leave you stultified and unable to say much of anything at all. Good ideas are much easier to come by than magic words.

Look, and move, forward.

 You will have seasons when you are more productive, seasons when you are less productive, and seasons when you are scarcely functional. Hopefully, over the course of your writing life, these will balance out into an overall sense of accomplishment, with a body of work that bears it out. When you are more productive, spend some time figuring out what enables you to work at that level, but don't make yourself crazy trying to recreate it every time you encounter a slump. Chances are, it's mostly a matter of circumstance: a legitimate manifestation of your brilliance, sure, but maybe also just good luck. Conversely, the seasons when you are less productive are also likely to be those in which your luck is worse than usual, and not a final revelation of your incompetence.

Capitalism tells us that time is modular, that any hour has potentially the same value as any other hour, and hence that missed hours can be replaced. Nope. If there is something big that keeps you from your work for a season, you won't (sorry) be able to get those hours back. And especially if that something big is also something massively unpleasant, you probably won't be able to stop feeling lousy about those lost hours, anxious or mournful about the work you could be doing, and resentful of the people around you who happen to be enjoying one of those good-luck seasons of magical writing. In those moments, all you can do is muddle through: do what you can with your radically reduced resources, plead for deadline clemency if you need it, and accept – your overwhelming fatigue may help lubricate this process – that you probably won't be producing your very best work at this particular god awful juncture. And don't compound the insult by blaming yourself for those lost hours, those words left unwritten. For my part, now that I'm halfway (give or take) back in the saddle after a pretty unrelentingly miserably eighteen months, it's a daily struggle not to take the losses of that period out on myself. It takes a lot of mental discipline to focus on what you can do, not on what you didn't because you couldn't.

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So that's a little bit of what I know now that I didn't know before. It strikes me as odd that academics, generally so good at questioning why things are the way they are, rarely bring their skeptical sensibilities to the task of questioning their own work habits or the expectations they have internalized. And for those who are satisfied with their circumstances, there may be no need for this kind of querying. But I get the impression (or maybe I just run with an exceptionally grumpy crowd) that lots of us are less than satisfied. Of course, many of the reasons for that are structural, and so insuperable by these tiny little hacks. But despite this, or maybe because of it, minor adjustments made in the service of your own comfort are meaningful, worth it, and necessary.