

HOW TO MAKE A WRITING PARTNERSHIP WORK FOR YOU

‘Instead of *finding* time to write, *allot* time to write’ (Paul Silvia, *How to Write a Lot*, p. 12)

The world is full of distractions, and many of us feel bad quite a lot of the time for failing to get stuff done. This needn’t be the case. Imagine getting to Friday afternoon and feeling great about what you achieved this week, and taking a happy weekend off in confidence that next week will be good too. In the Humanities in particular, we often end up trying and struggling and failing on our own to make this our reality, and forget that our peers and colleagues are going through all the same difficulties we are. When unstructured isolation is a large part of the problem, teamwork (or just pairwork) can work wonders.

The original idea for the Humanities Division writing partnerships scheme, first piloted in 2015-16, was therefore simply to facilitate communal writing: arrange a time to meet, have a quick catch-up, tell each other what your writing goals are, and write for a set length of time. Then maybe get a coffee and do another session afterwards. However, we learnt from feedback after the first term that some people found it helpful to exchange pieces of writing in advance sometimes too, and meet to discuss them as well as maybe getting on with more writing before or after. The meet-ups can also work remotely, with a video link, and sometimes even just accountable goal-setting using a shared spreadsheet can make a real difference.

Whether you already have a writing partner and would like advice on fine-tuning the partnership, or are considering the idea and want a sense of how it could help, we hope this document will be useful. It’s intended primarily as a source of ideas for making the most of a writing partnership, taking into account the varied aims and constraints you may bring to it.

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Effective scheduling: time, place, frequency, and length

The first principle of getting writing done is to **make a schedule and stick to it**. A writing partnership is an excellent way to ensure you do both, because you need a schedule for your meetings, and your partner will know (and be annoyed) if you don't show up. The key is to turn your writing schedule into a non-negotiable part of your weekly routine, not to cram in as many hours as possible. Our ability to focus consistently is much less than we might like to think, so keeping your meet-ups (and solo writing sessions) short means you're much less likely to drift into distractions like email. And if you successfully meet up twice a week and get great writing done, you'll be much more inclined to build on your success by adding in a third weekly slot once you know it works for you.

Start small: 60 or 75 minutes for writing plus 10 minutes for planning and reflection, twice a week, for instance. Again, once you see the benefits, you can always add in more hours. First thing in the morning can work well, since it means time is carved out before the rest of life starts to get in the way. But look at your diary and what you know about yourself: will a daily breakfast meet-up at 8:30 be a great reason to get out of bed, or doomed to sleep-deprived failure? Setting a regular time will also help minimise the need for tortuous email scheduling. Once you've chosen your time, protect it: **just say no**. Encourage each other in practising this crucial academic skill.

And don't fall into the trap of thinking that you need to feel like writing; this just doesn't work. '**Serious writers write**, inspired or not. Over time they discover that routine is a better friend to them than inspiration' (Keyes 2003, *The Writer's Book of Hope*, p. 49). Remember that academic writing isn't composing an ode to the Muses on unsullied parchment: it's a pragmatic process of conveying information in a readable way. (Or, as Paul Silvia (p. 26) puts it, 'Writing a grant proposal is like doing your taxes, except that you can't pay your accountant to do it for you.') Of course, the academic writing process also includes plenty of prewriting – reading, generating ideas, outlining, analysing data – and postwriting: editing, cutting, responding to comments, formatting, etc. 'Any action that is instrumental in completing a writing project counts as writing' (Silvia, p. 19). The phase in the middle is often the most daunting and the easiest to postpone, though, so you may find the meet-ups helpful motivation to get the necessary 'prewriting' done in preparation for a solid hour or two of the generating-new-words kind of writing.

Starting a writing partnership is a precious opportunity to **inject structure** into your day and your week. It's worth bearing in mind that 'I'm going to spend the whole day/week writing' is not a structure; structure is the set of concrete and manageable steps that, once the day or week is over, will have brought you to a point from which you can look back and feel pleased that you spent an adequate portion of it writing with focus. The potential for effective structure lies in the separation between the writing sessions and the rest of your time, so again, protect it: turn your phone on silent, log out of email and social media, make this time feel different. Structure is important *within* the writing sessions too. (See [Sharepoint](#) for a '*Writing session template*' with more guidance for getting started.) Take breaks. Email is not a break. Doing anything on your screen is not a break. Set a timer for 10 or 15 minutes, then stand up, move around, do some stretches, get a cup of tea, have a brief chat about your progress. This is the opposite of procrastination: it's earned and dedicated

time to get your blood flowing, clear your mind, and bring you back to the laptop with renewed clarity. Trying to write for hours and hours with no real break is like trying to lift heavy weights every day: without real rest, all you'll do is get weaker. Whereas if you do practise writing in short bursts regularly and frequently, you *will* get stronger, no matter how 'productive' any individual session may seem. You'll get better at just getting words on the page, and you'll grow more confident that even if they're not perfect, some of them are probably usable, and that having written *something* is in itself an achievement.

Work out with your partner **what places suit you best**. I do my best to avoid serious incompatibility when pairing partners, but if you realise that your preferences aren't entirely aligned, or the places you thought would work well for meet-ups turn out not to, experiment. If you want different things, you could try to find a compromise (e.g. a college MCR or SCR, or a large café first thing in the morning, or somewhere like Café Pi in the Maths Institute or the Hub at Kellogg College, might be a middle ground between busy café and library). You could also try adjusting your habits within the meet-ups, e.g. try listening to music or birdsong if you find the environment a bit distracting. Or if you keep preferring different things, you could agree simply to alternate between them. A fixed time in a varied place might be a nice mixture of routine and stimulation. Whatever you do, give everything a proper chance (at least three sessions) before dismissing it as unworkable. It's remarkable how much we can adjust to if we decide we want to. (See Writing Tip 4, '*Changing places*', for more ideas here.)

One of the changes reported by participants in the Humanities Division's twice-weekly Academic Writing Group is that it's helped dispel their belief that they can only work in complete isolation with all their carefully accumulated props to hand – teaching them instead that writing will simply happen if you create time for it to. Robert Boice's 'blocking questionnaire' (see the Resources section below) may be a helpful way of thinking about the different kinds of **obstacle to writing** (or all the things that tend to get lumped together as 'writer's block'): if you're struggling to get stuff written, is it because of work apprehension (feeling you have no good ideas, or it'll be tiring, or you just don't want to), writing apprehension (feeling you're no good at writing specifically), procrastination (using delaying tactics like housework or daydreaming), dysphoria (feeling depressed or panicky when trying to write), impatience (expecting to finish something as soon as you start it), perfectionism (trying to make your first draft your final draft, or never feeling anything is ready to send off), or unnecessary rules (getting obsessed with specific times or places for writing, or with particular formatting or stylistic principles)? Once you know where your particular sticking point lies, you should find it easier to tackle head-on, by making targeted plans to deal with it, together with your writing partner. On the other hand, just thinking less and writing more might often be the best solution: 'Writer's block is no more than the behavior of not writing', and 'Just as aliens abduct only people who believe in alien abductions, writer's block strikes only writers who believe in it' (Silvia, pp. 45-47). Ultimately, **comfort zones tend to expand only when forced to**.

Effective planning

Treat **goal-setting** as a legitimate, indeed crucial part of the writing process. Devote real time to higher levels of goal-setting – perhaps together with your writing partner, as well as

your regular ten top-and-tailing minutes per hour for planning and reflection. Reviewing and planning can work well at many different levels from session to day to week to month to current life phase. I recommend you try out session planning for at least one writing session a day (and always do it with your writing partner) and that you also try at least one higher planning level, ideally two.

First, it's important to clarify for yourself what your **high-level writing goals** are. What are you trying to achieve with your writing: what are your priorities for your current position, and what job, grant, degree, or other next professional step do you want to take, and why? What writing projects will be most helpful in making these aims a reality? Once you have this document, revisit it (at least once a term or so) and tinker if necessary, so it stays a good fit for your ambitions (and specifically your ambitions for yourself, not anyone else's expectations of you). You may find Writing Tip 11, '*Role and goal mapping*', a helpful template for standing back and taking the longer view. Equally, updating your CV (Writing Tip 8, '*CV review*'), could be a nicely pragmatic source of clarity.

You may find the unit of a calendar **month** a helpful one for taking stock of your **project goals**: things like revising a chapter or an article, writing an invited chapter, revisiting the paper you started last year, drafting a grant proposal for research or conference funding, are the kinds of project goal that can feasibly get done within the space of a month. You may like to arrange a monthly check-in with your writing partner, writing your list of project goals either beforehand or together, and then discuss it: does it really cohere with your high-level roles and goals, or are there some things other people ask/tell you to do which aren't actually in your best interests? Tick things off your project goal list when you finish them, and reward yourself accordingly.

The level of the **week** is one of the most powerful pivots between the immediate and the longer-term, between **project and task goals**. I strongly recommend that you try carving out time on Friday afternoon, over the weekend, or first thing on a Monday morning for a weekly professional review to assess the week that's been and make a plan for the next. Tip 12, '*Regular professional review*', offers more explanation and some possible templates for this.

Then there's **today**. It can be extremely constructive to start every day with a few lines on a spreadsheet or in a notebook committing you to a certain set of **task goals** and activities. Like everything else about planning, the point is to narrow down choice: to do the hard work of choosing while you're feeling alert and enthusiastic, and to have the results of that work to turn to in the mid-afternoon slump where you'd otherwise drift to email or worse. Writing Tip 1, '*Setting and achieving goals*', offers suggestions for goal-setting and review at the daily as well as a session-by-session scale.

And so the final level is the **detailed planning** for each specific writing session: this is where your plan needs to be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound). There's no point telling yourself you're going to finish the whole article today, or in the next two hours, if you're only halfway through, just like there's no point resolving to make 'decent progress' on your blog post if you have no sense of what you mean by that. 'Make progress with x' and 'do more on y' are not goals, they're hopes. And 'finish x, y, and z before lunch' is likely not a goal but a pipe dream. Without actual goals, we lose focus, never feel good about our achievements, and therefore get less done. So what can you realistically

do *now*, in this session? You could plan to write a specific number of words or paragraphs, reread a submitted paper and tackle half the reviewers' comments, brainstorm and outline a new piece, correct proofs or add in missing references. Experiment with what goals work for different types and stages of task: is aiming to get a discrete section drafted a helpful way to start out on an article, whereas a target number of words works better later in the process? Get into the habit of taking five minutes to discuss your session plan with your partner before you start, and of assessing your progress together – halfway through, if you stop for a break, and at the end. Learn from each other about how to set goals that act as true motivators for you while you write, whether by being definitely doable or perhaps by pushing you to try for just a little more than you're sure you can do.

You'll become expert at goal-setting, and feel really good about achieving your goals, by **monitoring your progress** over the longer term too. Consider creating shared spreadsheets to record how well you did in each writing session and track it over weeks and months. As I set out in Writing Tip 1, Paul Silvia suggests a simple matrix to record *words*, *goals*, and *projects*: record the number of words you wrote (leave blank if you weren't actually generating new words), whether or not you met your session goal (0 = unmet, 1 = met), and which project you were working on (to chart how long it takes you to get through different major tasks). You might be surprised to learn how much you can actually get done with just a few hours a week of dedicated time. Then celebrate with your partner – whether with a nice coffee or something bigger – when either of you reaches a project goal. Share your frustrations, too, and help each other learn from them.

Writing well

Working well and writing well are always intertwined. Both require and reward **structure and clarity**. Knowing what you want to say and being confident you know how to say it make problems of focus and productivity less likely to arise, and writing things you enjoy reading always helps too. Conversely, having realistic routines and regular breaks makes it easier to think and writing more clearly. Writing well means somewhat different things to different people, but there are certain academic habits that tend to run counter to it: trying to communicate your own cleverness more than anything else, for instance, or thinking that complex ideas demand complex prose.

To help yourself work out what you're trying to say and why, you could try the following **motive spot check**. Complete these statements:

1. (In 10 words or fewer) I am writing about...
2. I arrived at this topic because...
3. Others have argued that...
4. But I argue that...
5. This should be important to my readers because...

You and your writing partner could try this exercise and compare notes at the start of a session, and adapt it to your current projects as necessary. (See Writing Tip 2, '*What are you writing about and why?*', for more on how to use these questions together, and Tip 13, '*How to write an abstract*', for another format in which to practise clarifying your writerly

intentions.)

If the blank page is an obstacle, you could have a go at **freewriting**, or free association. Write down a topic keyword or a 'how' question (or use your answer to point 1 or 4 in the motive task above). Write as much (not as well) as you can for a set time, say 10 minutes. Use pen and paper if you think that might help you keep up the flow better than typing. Get up for a few minutes' break, then return and read through what you've written, highlighting anything that might be useful. This can also be a useful tactic any time when you find yourself tired or uninspired and your mind starts turning to your inbox or a news website. If you and your partner work in related fields (and perhaps just as well if not), you could swap, and read and highlight each other's scribbles. Or **get rid of the written word** altogether: speak aloud to your partner, for a set time, about a set topic, while he or she makes notes. (Or, on your own, speak into an audio recorder, and take notes of anything helpful afterwards.) There's more on these options in Writing Tip 4, '*Thinking aloud*'. These exercises all embody the principle that formulating some ideas in however messy a form is better than getting paralysed by expecting instant perfection. Writing is the process of working out ideas, all the way from their hazy origins towards clarity, and it's fine for not all of that process to look like 'writing well'. It may not even look like writing at all: we evolved as speaking not writing animals, and talking can be a remarkably effective way of cutting through the academic bullshit. (See also Writing Tip 10, '*How to plan and give a talk*'.)

Another way of keeping each other focused on clarity might be to look at examples of unclarity: keep an eye out for examples of **academic writing you find really hard to read**. Take ten minutes now and then to share and discuss your finds: what kind of faults do you find cropping up repeatedly (over-use of adjectives; over-long words, sentences, or paragraphs; over-use of the passive voice; unclear use of near-synonyms; hedging or lack of direction; lack of convincing supporting evidence...)? Consider not just the problems, but the reasons why the author might have ended up making these choices. You could even have a go at rewriting the passage, thinking carefully about what you're changing and why. This can be a revealing and motivational exercise for making your own writing do better.

Reading aloud short pieces of each other's work with an eye on style is the logical next step. You could share a passage you're particularly pleased with, or a passage you're struggling with, or something you wrote ages ago and can't make up your mind what to do with, and listen to how it sounds in your partner's voice. (See Writing Tip 3, '*Hearing what your writing sounds like*'.) This requires a certain degree of trust, of course, but if you're able to listen to and be honest with each other, you might learn a lot. If your partner works outside your field, it might be even more helpful, since they're less likely to be distracted by pre-formed opinions about the content. This can be a great way of identifying those sentences that are unreadably long and complicated, or the phrases that make you stumble or misread, or conversely the bits that flow beautifully and make you want to keep reading. This exercise can also be useful for pruning away superfluous punctuation, like all those commas you suddenly realise impede the flow rather than clarifying anything. And you can do it reading aloud on your own, too, if your partner isn't to hand, or as a follow-up after you've made edits based on your shared reading.

You might also devote specific writing meet-ups to **experimenting with aspects of style** that can make instant and interesting differences: in particular, flashpoints at the boundaries of 'academic' and more 'popular' styles, like contractions (it'd seem they're uncommon), the

first person (I care about this topic because...), or forthright admissions of subjectivity (not ‘It would seem that...’ but ‘I think that...’). How does your writing change if you include elements like these? Do you like how it changes? If you write for audiences other than academic book or journal readers, how do you adjust your style for those pieces, and could those adjustments helpfully inform your academic writing? Metaphor is another important element of language use and reception often overlooked in academic writing (see Writing Tip 9, ‘Thinking through your metaphors’). And abstract-writing is a great test of clarity and concision in a naturalistic form (see Tip 13, ‘How to write an abstract’). If you want more ideas for stylistic experimentation, I recommend Helen Sword’s *Stylish Academic Writing*; each chapter ends with a ‘Things to try’ section.

Finally, I encourage you to keep a list of ideas for things you might one day write about (see Writing Tip 14, ‘Ideas list’). It’s fun to add to when a little lightbulb moment happens, and can be nice to scroll/flick back through at sluggish times when you could do with a bit of inspiration.

Peer support

This programme is primarily intended to help you help yourself, and your partner, establish good working habits that benefit you and the work you do. But your writing habits flow seamlessly into other parts of your professional and personal routines, and from there into your career aspirations and how you feel about your life and work. When you work regularly alongside someone else, you may find you’re instinctively starting to explore these broader questions together now and then.

Consider asking each other early on **whether you want to pursue this peer-supporting angle more systematically**. If you happen to be paired with someone at a different career stage from you, remember that this kind of support can still be mutually beneficial: if you’re the person who’s further along in their career, you may find it valuable to gain experience of supporting a more junior colleague, and to crystallise knowledge you didn’t know you had. And of course, professional and life experiences vary hugely, and if you’re the more junior partner, there will still be all kinds of ways in which you can contribute, not least by being a listening ear and a sounding board. Don’t underestimate the value of regular, focused, non-judgemental conversation.

As for **how to get going**: after one of your early writing meet-ups you may like to have a coffee and tell each other a bit about how you’re finding things work- and career-wise at the moment: sticking points, open questions, things that are going well. (The ‘Role and goal mapping’ exercise (Tip 11) or a CV review (Tip 8) could be helpful starting points here.) Your discussion might cover things like writing obstacles, strategies for publishing, academic career planning and applications, careers beyond academia, work-life and time-management difficulties, recent successes, and forthcoming opportunities. You might like to make notes on what your partner says, and then help them make a list of possible action points: things to research, pros and cons weigh up if a decision needs making, things to stop doing or keep doing, etc. If you generate questions you don’t know how to tackle, you might find the Oxford Careers Service site helpful (see the Resources list below), or feel free to get in touch with the programme coordinator, Emily Troschianko, if you need other pointers.

Then you can decide whether you'd like, for example, to have a peer-support chat like this every month or so, or check in for an extra fifteen minutes once a week at the end of your writing meet-up. A **pre-determined schedule** of whatever kind is important, since a helping hand or dose of common sense is often it's hardest to ask for when it's most needed. Setting a standard frequency for supportive chats (e.g. once a week or once a month) and making sure they happen in a comfortable environment with tea or coffee to hand is a good way to prevent either of you from worrying you're imposing on the other. And in all of these discussions, it may help to bear in mind that there may be a gap between your partner's **wants and needs**: be prepared to identify challenges and opportunities that might expand his or her cognitive horizons. Above all, be **reliable, attentive, constructive, and open**. From there everything else will flow naturally.

Staying flexible

Being strict with yourself – and your partner – about creating a writing schedule is one thing, but some plans just don't end up working out. In particular, writing partnerships easily founder on a lack of commitment to regular meetings. If you've given things a decent try and don't feel things are quite working, **change something** about the meet-ups or the rest of your life. You could try:

- Adopting more **drastic tactics** for helping yourself make time for writing and then using it well, e.g. leaving your phone at home every morning, writing on paper for a week, cancelling all your appointments (invent whatever reason you want) and declaring a sabbatical week for a return to writing. Finding balance often requires going temporarily to the other extreme – nowhere more so than with a tech addiction or chronic over-busyness. It will help if your partner knows about and supports your plans and can meet more often during your detox week.
- Not using **absence from Oxford** as a reason not to meet. It's often perfectly possible to keep to your schedule, or a scaled-back version of it, when one or both of you are away: use video conferencing (set a timer and sit within range of your camera, perhaps with the sound muted), or just exchange an email every morning and evening to state your goals and report your progress. See Writing Tip 6, '*Remote meet-ups*', for more on this. If one of you is **ill**, you could agree that the other person will still have the arranged session on their own and report back afterwards (with no obligation on the ill person to respond).
- **Inviting another person** to join some of your writing meet-ups, to create a more varied dynamic and lessen the disruptions of illness or travel.
- Best of all, as a starting point for all of these changes and more, **just talk**. Say you'd like to think about ways of improving the partnership and/or your broader writing habits, because in some specific ways the partnership isn't doing quite what you want it to. Ask for your partner's input. As the partner, don't be defensive; collaborate on responding flexibly to reality.

Writing Tip 7, '*Lucky Dip*', offers more ideas for changing things up.

Remember, too, that **your partnership is a social creature**. Treat your partner as a human

being, not as someone who exists to make your writing go better. That means arriving in time for a few minutes of friendly chat before you set your timer. It means making sure you're both sensitive to how things are working out for the other person. Do you want the same things from the partnership, and if not, is it serving one of you better than the other? Can anything be done to make it more balanced? The reciprocity needn't be total, but the relationship will keep working only if you both feel you're gaining something from it.

Be honest with each other about wanting things to change – and, if it comes to it, about deciding you want to **bring the partnership to an end**. Try to take positive lessons from this too, and help your partner to do the same. Don't just drift into non-contact; that's a depressing and sterile outcome for anything.

Be in touch with the writing partnerships coordinator Emily Troschanko (emily.troschanko@humanities.ox.ac.uk) if you need any kind of problem-solving input.

And lastly, be forgiving of yourself. **Be realistic about the rest of life** and its demands and rewards, and build them into your goal-setting from the outset, rather than pretending your family and your sport and your Netflix habit don't exist. A Sunday-night general week-planning session can help here. But even the best laid plans... and that's OK too.

Resources

Inspire yourself to start making rather than looking for time to write, with Paul Silvia's short and entertaining book *How To Write A Lot*: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/How-Write-Lot-Practical-Productive/dp/1591477433>

Take guidance in how to make your writing more readable from Helen Sword's evidence-based *Stylish Academic Writing*: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Stylish-Academic-Writing-Helen-Sword/dp/0674064488/>

Find out about the Shut Up and Write model (and other thesis-whispering ideas): <http://thesiswhisperer.com/shut-up-and-write/>

Learn how to create an online accountability group: <https://theaccidentalphilologist.wordpress.com/2015/06/05/the-community-you-have-the-community-you-need-building-an-online-accountability-group/> ('It makes it all less lonely')

Assess what aspects of getting down to writing you find most difficult: <http://newforums.com/resources/ebooks/blocking-questionnaire-tool-scholarly-writers/> (See also Robert Boice's book *Professors as Writers*: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Professors-Writers-Self-Help-Productive-Writing/dp/091350713X/>)

Explore the Oxford Careers Service site, including pages for research students and staff: <http://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/researchers/>

Try out our workbook designed for optimising and managing ‘portfolio’ (i.e. multi-stranded) careers – which all academics arguably have by default:
<http://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/freelancers/>

If things are feeling tough, turn to our workbook and podcast series on ‘Overcoming a sense of academic failure’: <http://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/change-setbacks/>

Use templates to track your goals and progress: <http://www.ithinkwell.com.au/resources>

Track the time you actually spend on different tasks (and non-tasks): <https://toggl.com/>

See whether any of these ‘15 tools that will help you stay focused’ sound worth trying:
<https://blog.producthunt.com/15-tools-that-will-help-you-stay-focused-e7e4cf22499c>

Stream different varieties of café noise straight into your ears: <https://coffitivity.com>

Or if you prefer Antarctic winds, ocean waves, or fairy glens, try these:
<http://www.calmsound.com>

And our Programme resources, including all the writing tips mentioned here, are on Sharepoint:
https://sharepoint.nexus.ox.ac.uk/sites/humanities/research_training/training/Pages/Baillie-Gifford-Writing-Partnerships-Programme.aspx

Let us know if you have favourites that aren’t on this list!

**Baillie Gifford Writing Partnerships Programme Coordinator, Emily Troscianko
Humanities Division Training Team, University of Oxford, Michaelmas Term 2019**