

Book Review

Finding Your Voice in the World of Academic Writing and Publishing: A Guide for both Novice and Experienced Writers¹

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(Silvia, P. J. (2019). *How to write a lot: A practical guide to productive academic writing* (2nd ed.). American Psychological Association.)

This book is an important resource for anyone looking to improve their academic writing skills. Nietzsche (2007) once likened learning about writing to that of learning how to dance: "Dancing in all its forms cannot be excluded from the curriculum of all noble education; dancing with the feet, with ideas, with words, and, need I add that one must also be able to dance with the pen?" (p. 43). Writing is a skill that, like dancing, must be learned through practice, and it is a skill that should be in itself a rewarding venture for the writer. Writing is hard, and learning to become a successful academic writer is even harder. Publishing is a fact of life for most professionals in academia. As academic writing is not a skill that is often explicitly taught in graduate schools, Silvia's book is dedicated to helping novice (or even the expert) writers learn the trade. With 133 pages, this is the kind of book that can be binge-read in just a few hours, but the reader must be wary of the pitfalls of binge-writing. This book is essentially a treatise against the harmful practice of binge-writing. The author's primary argument is for the implementation and maintenance of regular writing schedules. You should be scheduling writing time regularly, just as teachers make time in their schedules for their classes every week. Persistence and perseverance are key to finding success. As academics, developing our writing skills helps us become more knowledgeable in our fields. In a discussion about how learning takes place, Mayhew et. al (2016) note that writing often "may refine [one's] abilities to evaluate competing truth claims and critically question what is known: as [one's] skills become more sophisticated, cognitive development occurs" (p. 152). Regular writing is of central importance not only because it allows us the opportunity to share our ideas and discoveries with others, but also because it presents us with the opportunity to become more knowledgeable and well-balanced professionals in our fields.

Silvia's chapters outline many of the basics of academic writing. The book includes topics ranging from tackling common excuses that writers make to maintaining a healthy writing schedule, to writing for journals and books. The author works in the field of psychology, but this second edition has been updated to apply to academics in a wide variety of fields. This edition also includes a new chapter on writing grant and fellowship proposals.

Chapter 1. In this introductory chapter to the book the author notes that most people struggle with academic writing and that no struggling writer should be discouraged. Writing is challenging, and academic writing is a skill, just like everything else, that is a source of struggle for most beginners. But with practice, careful attention, and patience, it is a skill that anyone can improve. Many professionals in academia note that academic writing is often marginalized, or omitted from training in graduate school. This book is intended to fill that gap and the author tries to teach even the most novice of faculty members to become more prolific writers. As Oscar Wilde (1894) famously wrote "Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught" (as cited in Pinker (2015), p. 11). We can read all the writing manuals in the world, but we are only able to improve our skills through practice, practice, practice.

This book's approach to academic writing centers around three basic concepts: (1) scheduling time to write, (2) procuring a place to write that is conducive to the task, (3) and finally going about the business of putting words on paper. Not everyone is the same when it comes to writing. Through these chapters, the author informs and guides the reader on their journey to finding success in academic writing.

In chapter 2, Silvia addresses what he calls specious barriers to writing. He chooses the curious term specious here because common complaints about writing that academics recite are often just excuses. The first specious barrier concerns the inability of busy professionals to find time to do much writing and improve their writing skills. The author argues that finding time should be replaced with allotting time. Prolific writers

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are not successful because they have a natural talent. They are successful because writing is very high up on their list of priorities, and they make time for it on a daily or weekly basis. This is the central idea in the book. The one fundamental suggestion that the author makes is this: you need to allot time for writing during your workday on a regular schedule (Silvia, 2019, p. 12). Treat it like a class, your writing class, with a student of one. You wouldn't ever cancel a class, except maybe for severe illness, or an unavoidable business trip. Schedule your writing time during your day like you schedule your class time, and only cancel your writing class, with a student of one, in extreme cases.

The specious barriers two to five in this chapter address the mitigation of excuses such as: (2) "I need to gather more data" or "I need to read more first." (3) "I need to find a better writing environment" (i.e., new computer, more comfortable desk, chair, etc.), (4) "I'm waiting until I'm more inspired to start writing" and (5) "I need to take care of many of the other items on my list of things to do first." The author addresses these fallacies and gives suggestions as to what one might do in order to become a more successful writer. However, allotting time to write regularly makes up the core argument in this book. If you want to improve the quality of your writing, if you want to write more, or publish more, you need to allot writing time into your daily and weekly routine like you would schedule your classes. Just write it into your calendar, and when the time comes, sit down, and just do it.

Chapter 3, The care and feeding of writing schedules, is essentially an expansion and in-depth discussion about allotting time for writing. Healthy writing schedules can have voracious appetites. So how can one go about best planning and caring for a writing schedule? First, pick a time slot that is defensible. The author suggests choosing a time slot that is usually free of other obligations such as meetings, service activities, or office hours. If you can't utilize that time slot 90% of the time for writing, find a different time slot. You also need to pick a workload that is appropriate for your situation. Some people have time to write every day, others maybe only one or two days a week. It's important to make a schedule that works best for you, so be honest with yourself. Now, find a nice place to do your writing. It may be tempting to write at a local coffee shop, but the cold hard truth is that successful academic writers spend most of their writing time in their rooms, by themselves, just sitting down and putting words on a page, then editing, editing, revising, and editing. Having well-thought-out, reasonable, and achievable goals is also an important component for finding success. Set realistic goals for yourself, stick to them, and self-monitor your progress. It's important to hold yourself accountable for your goals.

Chapter 4 discusses writing groups. Writing groups can be helpful for keeping you on track towards your goals. This is perhaps the least helpful chapter for me personally, as my particular working environment is not conducive to writing groups. However, if you find yourself in a situation where others might help you keep to your writing schedule, then by all means you should give it a try. There are three different kinds of writing groups, each with their strengths and weaknesses. Goals and accountability groups might be the least demanding for participants. These groups meet only to discuss and set personal goals. In the following sessions, the members check on the progress that was made toward these goals. Discussion of one's writing goals in a public forum can be a powerful motivator for the writer. Next, there are write-together groups, who meet at a specified place and time to sit down together, ignore each other, and just write. Some writers who have difficulty staying on task may find these groups helpful. Finally, there are feedback groups that engage in reading and giving feedback to one another. These can be quite demanding for participants, and careful choice of the group's members is imperative.

Chapter 5 is entitled A brief foray into style. Do you know how to properly use a semicolon? Are you sure? The truth is that most people think they know how to use it, but in fact they don't. It's alright if you don't, because guess what, proficient writers also like to write books about writing. There are plenty of them out there (this book is one of them!). One good, healthy goal for a writer is to buy and read at least one book about style every year. The famous Steven Pinker (2015) writes that "I like to read style manuals for another reason, the one that sends botanists to the garden and chemists to the kitchen: it's a practical application of our science" (p. 2). In this chapter, the author discusses how to choose the right words, how to write strong sentences, and how to avoid common mistakes. Finally, Silvia discusses the importance of writing terribly in the first draft, then engaging in efficient and effective editing and revision.

Chapter 6, Writing journal articles, is the primary reason I became interested in reading this book. The author describes peer-reviewed academic journals to be mostly predictable. There is a pattern of "beauty and persistence" (Silvia, 2019, p. 75) that seems to be acceptable to most journals. If you learn how to conform to the accepted conventions, publishing in peer-reviewed journals is a much less daunting task.

The first item dealt with in this chapter is picking an audience and an appropriate journal. Choosing the wrong journal will most likely result in outright rejection without the invitation to revise and re-submit your manuscript. Once you find a journal to write for, you need to skim through a few volumes and get a feel for the journal. Once you have done that, you can start putting pen to paper.

Before you begin writing, outlining your article is imperative. Overall, the length of your paper should be determined by one simple rule: short is good. There is no need to be wordy just to sound intellectual. Be logical, concise, and to the point. Your outline should reflect this rule. Silvia then discusses the mechanics of writing articles for journals. First, he gives a few pointers for writing an introduction to your article. You should give special attention to your methods section. Reviewers put a lot of time and thought into reviewing the methods section. Give a lot of information here about your variables, and your methods should be clear enough that another researcher would be able to easily re-create your study. When writing your results section, the author recommends a remind-describe-explain format. Your discussion section should follow a few guidelines. First, recap the main results of your research. It should look like an abstract section for your results. Then, it's necessary to re-visit some of the previous studies and make some connections between some of those and your study. Finally, wrap-up any loose ends. Showing limitations of your study will add credibility to your voice and help you to give some direction or consideration for future studies. The reference list also deserves some careful thought. They show a lot about you and how you go about your work. Your references should place you and your study within an academic field.

Once you have written your article and are satisfied with it, you can submit it to a journal for review. When dealing with editors one rule is king: show them that you can take criticism and make revisions without any drama. Editors are busy people, and if initially rejected, you are more likely to be invited to resubmit a revised article if the editor believes that you can do so without complicating matters too much for them. Rejection is a fact of life in academia. It happens to everybody, so do not be discouraged. If you are invited to revise and resubmit a manuscript, your best friend will be a well-written cover letter that explains the changes that you have made and is presented in a low-drama manner. Silvia concludes by reminding the writer to write well and become successful, "pick your journal first, outline according to the standard templates, submit great first drafts, and craft excellent resubmission letters" (Silvia, 2019, p. 97).

Silvia discusses writing books in chapter 7 and writing proposals for grants and fellowships in chapter 8. The process of writing books is usually much more involved than writing journal articles. If you fancy writing a book, it's a good idea to take a close look at this chapter. This chapter deals with topics such as reasons to write a book, planning and outlining a book, giving consideration for co-authors, actually sitting down and writing the book, as well as finding and dealing with a publisher. Chapter 8 is new to the 2nd edition, and the author gives some advice for writing grant and fellowship proposals. Receiving funding for academic research is helpful for many professionals, and often required for the academics looking to obtain tenure. In chapter 8, the author covers some conventional wisdom for grant-writing, then spends some time arguing for the need to write many grants, as opposed to writing just one.

The final chapter, The good things still to be written, serves as a short conclusion to the book. The author reminds the reader that writing is a difficult process, but with a healthy writing schedule, it is something that can be improved. The author concludes by reminding us that writing is not a race and that it is important to be honest with yourself, choose your writing schedule carefully, and write about topics that are of personal interest to you. If you can do all of these things, you too can become a successful and prolific writer.

How to write a lot: A practical guide to productive academic writing (Silvia, 2019) is just one of many manuals out there that can help the professional become a better writer. If academic writing and publishing are important to you and your career, I highly suggest that you pick this volume up. I have provided you with a summary of the book's content here, but if you are serious about improving your skills, you will need to read this book for Silvia's detailed discussions and advice for the academic writer.

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