

Academic Life

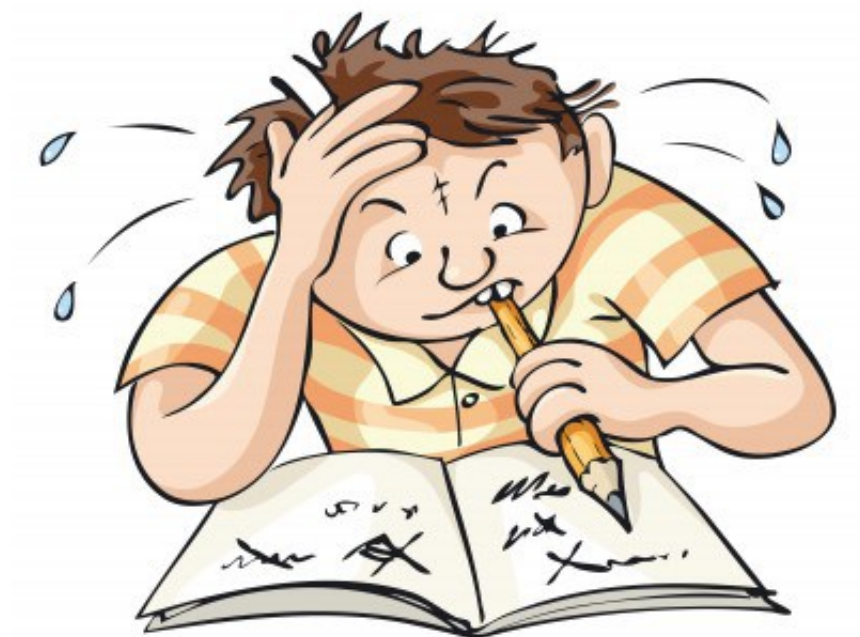
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Mastering the Art: The Two Stages of Writing

Posted on [March 9, 2013](#) by [Marialuisa Aliotta](#)

Some years ago I attended a workshop on academic writing at the University of Edinburgh. To be honest with you, I do not remember much about it. But at some point the instructor said something that really resonated with me.



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She said that writing happens in two main stages – ***drafting*** and ***editing*** – and that it is imperative that **one should approach each separately**.

Now, this may sound pretty obvious to you, but for me it was a revelation. I had never realized the importance of such a distinction, even though – with hindsight – this is exactly what my PhD supervisor used to do every time we were writing something together.

In truth, writing has never come easily to me. Being a perfectionist, I would like to produce the perfect draft in one go. Sadly, this is the worse possible recipe for major frustration. So, over the years, I have had to remind myself about keeping the two stages separate.

So, how does it work? and why can this improve your writing?

Here is the answer.

In the drafting stage, all you have to do is to fix concepts to the paper. Put down your thoughts, ideas, and key concepts. Do not worry about their proper layout or whether something should actually come before or after. Do not bother too much about style. In fact, do not even worry about grammar, or punctuation. Make sure you draft something **as quickly as possible**, almost without interrupting the flow of thoughts in your mind.

At this stage, your main focus should remain on the **message you want to convey**. To use the analogy with cookery from my [previous post](#), this is when you mix all your ingredients together (it is not the time to put the decoration on your cake!).



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Then, once you feel you have committed most of your content to the page, move away from your piece. Literally. Save it and store it. Hide your printout in a drawer and forget about it for a day or two.

When the time has passed, retrieve your script and critically review what you have written. This is **the editing stage**. Here – first and foremost – remember that “**the structure is king**”. Make sure that the content flows in the right logical order and **strive for clarity**.

This is often achieved by going from the general to the specific. At this point, you can still retain most of what you have written in its original form (again no worries about style, grammar, or punctuation. Yet!). If you need to re-arrange any material, just cut and paste entire blocks of text until you are satisfied that the order in which they appear makes sense.

Now, you can proceed to the next level down: **editing individual sections, paragraphs, and sentences**. This is the time to experiment with better ways of expressing a concept; refining the language; getting rid of the clutter. Probably, you will need to iterate this process a number of times before producing a text that flows and is stylistically pleasing to the reader.

Some people find editing boring, but in fact this is where **elegant writing is crafted**. It is in the final polishing of style that mastery is achieved. Keep this in mind and you may find editing a very rewarding aspect of your writing.

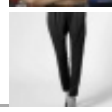
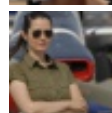
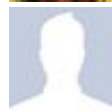
So, why do you need to keep the two stages separate? Well, if you are anything like me, chances are you will start writing something (just a sentence or two), read it,

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realize you do not like it, and start it all over again.

Some people call it **zig-zag writing**: going back and forth on the same line without actually achieving much. It is a surefire way to spend hours after hours trying to compose something, only to realize that the page is still mostly blank at the end of the day. Frustrating, isn't it?

So then, every time you sit down to write up, resist the temptation to achieve something good the first time round. And remember: (almost) anything you read that has been published will have undergone far more editing and polishing than the authors themselves are willing to admit. And most importantly, don't be hard on yourself expecting your first draft to be the polished final one.

Mastering good academic writing takes time. And effort.

The good news?

It can be learned.

PS Want to find out more about ways to improve your writing? I am preparing an on-line course fully packed with advice, tips, and strategies for mastering scientific academic writing. Email me to register your interest and I will get in touch once the course goes live.

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9 thoughts on “Mastering the Art: The Two Stages of Writing”



James Hayton says:

November 13, 2013 at 4:14 pm

I approach it a very different way. I freewrite using pen and paper, dumping ideas down all over the page. I never do it on the computer... writing all over a piece of paper means I really don't worry about structure, whereas a typed document has a specific order to it.

I then have a stock of ideas, and I can select the crucial points and create a rough outline (which may later change). I can then select ideas from the stock i have built up, and construct an argument piece by piece, taking care to express each idea and place it in context. (BTW, I wrote my entire thesis in 3 months and passed with zero corrections, so it was extremely effective)

If you freewrite on the computer, I would start again from a blank page so you can start to impose a structure.

I also think it is important to practice (just as an exercise) editing small sections. If you write a paragraph, edit it and make it good. If you can't do it for a paragraph when the pressure is off, you can't do it for 5000 words with a deadline looming!

[Reply](#)



[Marialuisa Aliotta](#) says:

[November 14, 2013 at 12:21 am](#)

Yes, James. I do some of that too. I typically use pen and paper to either sketch the overall structure (in sequence or as a mind map) or to fix down some key ideas. But when I want to start drafting for good, I do so at my computer. This allows me to move text around, cut & paste, and edit with very little effort when I am in revision stage. It also means I do not have to copy everything back into an electronic form because it's all already there (plus, in the

meantime, I have also become a lot faster at typing than I am at writing longhand 😊).

Ultimately, we all have our preferences and what really matters is to find out what works for us. Experimenting with different techniques can let us achieve precisely that.

Oh, and by the way, congratulations on writing a good thesis in just three months! Not many people achieve that 😊

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Pingback: [How Long Does Your Writing Take? | Academic Life](#)



Academic-Zone says:

March 21, 2013 at 4:44 pm

Hi Marialuisa! I happened to stumble across your blog this morning and liked what I saw. This post in particular caught my attention. All the tips you give are excellent for aiding the writing process. We have found that many people (especially students) treat the writing process holistically, instead of looking at it in a series of steps. Breaking down the writing process is a very good way to improve your writing fast.

[Reply](#)



Marialuisa Aliotta says:

March 21, 2013 at 10:08 pm

Hi, and thank you for stopping by. I am glad you liked this post. I personally gained from breaking down writing in this two distinct stages. It makes a real difference.

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Bogdan Pavkovic says:

[March 13, 2013 at 11:04 am](#)

Same thing here. Blank page bumper. Recently, I have read the similar approach somewhere else and I must admit that after putting it in practice, the results are astonishing. 😊

[Reply](#)



Marialuisa Aliotta says:

[March 13, 2013 at 11:16 am](#)

Hi Bogdan, Thanks for your comment. Yes, indeed! It's amazing what a difference this simple approach can make. All the best for your writing.

[Reply](#)



lee482 says:

[March 10, 2013 at 3:13 am](#)

Thank you Marialuisa, this article is so helpful to

me! It describes my problem exactly – spending so long trying to get things perfect and ending up with almost a blank page at the end of the day! Very much appreciate your clear, practical advice.

[Reply](#)



[Marialuisa Aliotta](#) says:

[March 10, 2013 at 10:25 am](#)

Hi Lee, I think this is a very common problem in fact. Try putting in practice the advice in the post and let me know how it goes. Good luck!

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