

# DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE WRITING PRACTICES

GRS Academic Writing Workshop, 12<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2018

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## DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE WRITING PRACTICES

"Writing is hard work.  
A clear sentence is no accident. Very  
few sentences come out right the  
first time, or even the third time.  
Remember this in moments of  
despair.  
If you find that writing is hard, it's  
because it *is* hard."

————— WILLIAM ZINSSER —————  
"ON WRITING WELL"  
(p9)

### Introduction: writing is hard?

Writing is a skill to be learnt rather than an innate talent. It must be developed through systematic instruction and practice. On this writing retreat we will be doing exactly that; learning and practicing the rules, techniques and strategies of good academic writing so that you can become, at least technically, a better writer.

Yet anyone who has ever sat down to write will know it's not easy; regardless of their writing ability. Recognising this and accepting it fully will make your life as a writer easier. The best 20<sup>th</sup> century writers, novelists including VS Naipaul, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck and George Orwell have spoken of the hardship of writing, the self-doubts, the need for discipline, courage and endurance. It's difficult because writing is intimately connected with the thinking process. As we write we try to make sense of the world we are representing through the text. Writing is frustrating and complicated and time-consuming; yet it is the most rewarding and necessary of all scholarly activities.

Writing is certainly easier when our ideas are clear and we know what we want to say and how to say it. That is a huge achievement, but it's not all there is about being a writer.

There is another side to the story, and for some it can become a sordid drama leading to despair. Who are the actors in this drama? Academics who can't find the time to write, who feel pressure from universities to publish and submit research funding applications, who have heavy teaching and administrative loads, half-finished manuscripts, emails, meetings, and supervision of graduate students. Post modern academic workers face a problem which has been coined

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**“reactionary workflow”**. We often put ourselves in a position where we are simply responding to things as they come into our view, including deadlines, emails, bureaucracy, students meetings and the like. In this drama a writer can possess all the technical skills of good writing but lack the skills needed to be a *productive writer*. To be a productive writer you need to cultivate the right attitude and practices to ensure you carve out of your busy schedule enough time and focus to write. Being a productive writer means stepping out of bad habits and re-tooling for enhanced productivity. You can write more and often by making small changes. This workshop is about introducing you to some of those changes.

### **Academic writing should be more routine, boring and mundane than it is.**

On the surface this statement probably doesn't look very appealing. Who wants to engage in anything that is routine, boring and mundane? And on top of that it necessitates some degree of solitude. Yet doing so is the secret to being a more productive writer. Our natural inclination is to avoid anything routine, boring and mundane and that perhaps is why many of us rely on, or are waiting for, inspiration to spur us into action. Our mind might even trick us into believing that without it no creative work can be done. But our mind can keep us trapped and prevent us from stepping outside these obstacles to productivity.

### **Establishing a rocksolid routine**

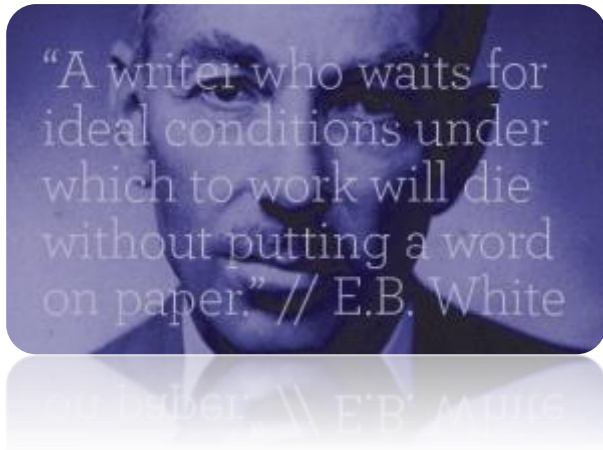
if you are serious about writing and being a productive writer you need to draw a line between workplace and family demands, and your own ambitions as a writer. This writing retreat is an example of this process. Part of the philosophy of the retreat is to allow you the “space” away from your regular daily distractions to have uninterrupted time to write. But this is a luxury. The challenge is to carve a space out from your daily routine *every day* from this point on to dedicate to writing. This is not an easy thing to do, and the following things for you to think about when establishing your writing routine.

Decide on how much time you would like to dedicate to writing each day. Most writing experts recommend two hours per day, but if you can only manage one hour then that is a significant achievement. Whatever it is establish some hard edges around those start and finish times and never let anything creep into them. The writing that you do during this time, however, must be “creative writing”. Creative writing means developing and refining ideas through the drafting process. It does not include “mechanical writing” such as note-taking from readings or editing or proofreading.

Become familiar with the rhythm of your energy levels and establish the time of the day when you feel fresh and energetic. Dedicate that time to your creative writing. For many the optimal time to write is first thing in the morning. If that is the case for you then schedule your dedicated writing time in the morning before engaging with any reactive work.

**Don't fall into the trap of “binge writing”**. After procrastinating, stalling and feeling guilty and anxious about not writing binge writers will devote a full weekend to madly producing pages of text; then perhaps produce nothing for another week or more. Whilst this may alleviate some of the guilt it is not conducive to being a productive writer in the long-term.





### *Don't wait for inspiration to start writing*

Many of the best writers adopt a work-man-like attitude towards writing. By this mean they don't let their moods dictate whether or not they will write. They write regardless of how they feel, whether or not they are inspired and motivated, or feeling lethargic or bored. John Steinbeck once suggested that writers should:

....abandon the idea that you are ever going to finish. Lose track of the 400 pages and write just one page for each day, it helps. Then when it gets finished, you are always surprised.

Frequency is the key to writing a lot. Steinbeck would set himself a target of writing 500 words every day. It didn't matter whether these were good words or material that would eventually be discarded. Frequency makes beginning new work easier, it keeps ideas fresh, it keeps the pressure off you, it sparks creativity and fosters productivity. Don't let your moods dictate when and for how long you write, discipline and routine go hand-in-hand.

### **Finding focus in a world of distractions**

We live in a world now dominated by new technologies. It brings to our front door an overload of information which at times can be overwhelming. Smart phones allow us 24-hour connection to friends, families, work and the world. Sometimes it feels as though we are simply waiting for the next text, email, tweet or Facebook post to arrive. What is worse is that studies have shown that workers who check for messages often take the opportunity to cycle through a range of other applications, translating into more wasted time. One of the biggest challenges in being productive is to learn to block out this relentless insidious, flow of attention grabbing messages. Indeed that is the cost of the overabundance of information and connectivity; it consumes our attention at the expense of focusing on and doing things that are more worthwhile.

In this writing retreat I recommend practising 'letting go of the world' through switching off your mobile phone and Internet. It is not good enough to simply turn your phone to silent, or minimise your email browser. When you do that a little bit of your mind is still distracted because it is anticipating what could be there. The powerful temptation to push that button on your iPhone to see if a message has arrived, or to check your email inbox, is strong (you might if you are sensitive enough feel a certain grasping shift of energy just before you do so).

Engaging with technology often gives one the illusion of being busy, and sometimes even the illusion of accomplishment. One of my worst habits was to arrive at my desk at 8 AM and check

my email inbox. Sometimes it would take me two hours to work my way through the emails, responding to other people's requests and needs and wasting the most productive time of my day. But when I cleared that last email, there was a sense of achievement, it was as though I had made good use of my time, and in the short term perhaps I had. But in reality I had achieved nothing towards accomplishing my most important long-term goals.

Cultivating the ability to maintain focus on your writing is one of the most important habits to cultivate, especially in an age where our attention is being pulled in many directions. Sometimes it is helpful to use prompts that help you to focus the mind. **Establish a regular writing place** where you do all your serious writing. Perhaps put on some music or make yourself a cup of tea before sitting down to write. These signal to the mind that it's time to write, they are habits which allow you to "settle" into a defined period of writing.

Developing **mindfulness** is an art they can be practiced even when you are writing. Disciplining the mind so that it doesn't easily wander and absorb into distractions (or create distractions so that it can absorb into them) is a skill that can be honed through practice. **Avoid at all costs double-tasking and multi-tasking**; the human mind cannot multitask when it comes to creative endeavours. Mindfulness also primes your mind to be open and clear and ready for insight. Writing is thinking and clarity of mind is critical in finding connections between ideas. If only half our mind is focused on the task of writing we are using only half our potential to develop and communicate our ideas.

Paul J. Silvia, in his book *How to Write A lot* (2014 7<sup>th</sup> Printing) presents **four common 'specious barriers'** to describe the excuses writers use to not write:

1. 'I can't find the time to write' or 'I could write more if I was able to find big blocks of time'.
2. 'I need to do some more reading/analysis/interviews first before I can get to writing'.
3. 'To write a lot, I need a new computer/desk/workspace'.
4. 'I'm waiting until I feel like it' or 'I write best when I'm inspired to write'.

### Summary - Reflecting on your writing practice and the writing task

#### Can you improve your writing productivity?

If you feel your writing efficiency could be improved, you may wish to consider what is preventing you from writing more productively. The academic writing habits you have developed over the course of your career may not meet your current writing needs.

You may wish to:

- Optimise your writing environment - experiment with your writing conditions, manage distractions, recognise and reduce procrastination behaviours
- Plan your writing – prioritise tasks, set short-long achievable term goals, plan writing sessions
- Write regularly – daily in short-medium bursts?
- Monitor progress – keep a writing log
- Adopt a strategic approach to writing – separate drafting from editing

Sword. 2010. How to be a productive writer. MAI Review.

<file:///uniwa.uwa.edu.au/userhome/staffo/00052680/Desktop/387-2593-1-PB.pdf>

Sword. 2016. 'Write every day!: a mantra dismantled'. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 21(4): 312

RescueTime <https://www.rescuetime.com/>

VITAE The Balanced Researcher - Strategies for busy researchers

<http://www.ithinkwell.com.au/ebook-the-balanced-researcher>

### **PARTICIPANT EXERCISE I: SELF AUDIT & GOAL SETTING**

Think about your current work habits and try to identify any day-to-day practices (or excuses) that are preventing you from focusing on your writing.

Develop a plan for engaging in regular, focused productive writing. Consider things like:

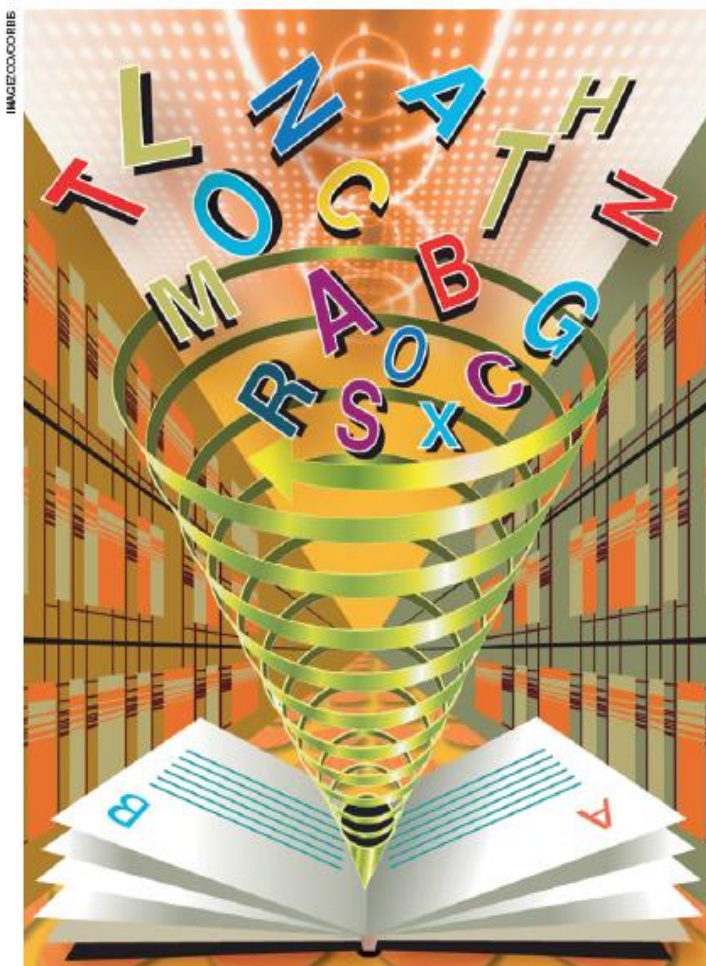
- Where
- When
- Writing projects
- Word goal
- Strategies for prioritising this time

# CAREERS

**EDUCATION** US needs to improve science literacy to prepare workforce p.130

**TURNING POINT** Biochemist's high-risk research direction pays off p.131

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## COLUMN

### Turbocharge your writing today

Before you can tackle the overwhelming task of huge writing projects, you must first put aside some widely held myths, say Maria Gardiner and Hugh Kearns.

As a graduate student, you might find yourself well on the way with your education and 'ABD' (all but dissertation). Day after day, you tell yourself that you really, really intend to start writing your paper. After all, you've collected all the data, analysed them many times and entered them into tables.

But then you start thinking that maybe you need just a few more data. Perhaps, too, you should try a different analysis technique. And what if the tables you used aren't the right ones, or need to be formatted differently?

Many of the thousands of researchers we have worked with are constantly being tripped up by finicky, niggling details that keep them from writing up their research. Every day, they mean to start, but every day, something gets in their way or seems more important — and this can go on for years. Some very common obstacles get in the way of high-quality, high-quantity scholarly writing, but powerful, evidence-based techniques can help researchers to overcome repetitive and unhelpful habits and get moving (see 'How to get out of a dissertation-writing rut').

#### WRITING MYTHS

The biggest impediments to scholarly writing are long-held myths that seem to get passed down through the academic ranks like precious but unhelpful ancient wisdom. The first is the Readiness Myth — "I should write when I feel ready, and I don't feel ready yet". The secret to high output is that you have to write before you feel ready, because you might never reach that point. Researchers read endlessly and conduct countless experiments in the belief that it will eventually make them feel ready to write — we call these habits readitis and experimentitis. But ironically, all that reading and experimenting often makes them less likely to write, and more confused. So the first way to speed up your writing is to stop waiting, stop reading and experimenting, and start writing. You won't feel ready, but you have to do it anyway.

This brings us to the second myth, the Clarity Myth — "I should get it all clear in my head first, and then write it down". This isn't how writing works in practice. You have probably had the experience in which you were sure about how a paper would go until you started to write it. Then you discovered that there were inconsistencies, or it didn't flow well or the links didn't make sense. This tells you that it wasn't all that coherent in your head, after all. In fact, writing clarifies your thinking. Writing is not recording — you don't just take ▶



## CAREERS

## EDUCATION

## Better teaching needed

The United States must boost the number of people pursuing degrees and careers in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM), says a 23 June report from the National Academies. The nation should foster better education in schools, said the report, *Successful K–12 STEM Education: Identifying Effective Approaches in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics*. The authors also recommend improving STEM literacy to fill STEM-related jobs that do not require advanced degrees, such as science teacher or energy technician. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics says that only 4 of the 16 STEM-related jobs with the largest projected growth by 2018 need an advanced degree.

## JOB-HUNTING TOOLS

## Inside information

An online forum aims to give job seekers inside information about employers. CareerBliss ([www.careerbliss.com/](http://www.careerbliss.com/) company-questions) in Irvine, California, matches applicants with current employees who can answer queries. The forum has respondents for about 500 companies, universities and organizations in the United States including biopharmaceutical firms such as Pfizer and Genentech, says spokeswoman Alia Henson. Questions can be on any topic, including research funding or grant opportunities.

## FAMILIES

## Women want flexibility

Female early-career researchers with newborn babies are most likely to want to keep their jobs if their employers provide security and flexibility, including the right to leave work to care for an ill child, a study finds. Published on 23 May in the bi-monthly *Journal of Applied Psychology* (D. S. Carlson *et al.* *J. Appl. Psychol.* doi:10.1037/a0023964; 2011), the study reports better job retention for new mothers who stay physically and mentally healthy as a result of accommodations. Lead author Dawn Carlson, a professor of management at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, says that scientists should check how a prospective employer handles the needs of families before accepting an offer. To retain female staff, universities should allow maximum flexibility. "Whether extending the tenure clock or some other measure, the organization has to figure out a way to support these people if they want to reduce turnover," says Carlson.

► a photocopy of what is in your head and put it on the page. It is a far more creative and interactive process. As you write, you develop your thoughts. Writing is, in fact, rigorous thinking. So the second way to turbocharge your writing and improve its quality is to get the words down on the page — no matter how bad you think they look or sound at first.

## SNACK WRITING

Once researchers get beyond the myths that stop them writing, they often declare that they can't possibly write anything eloquent, insightful or clever unless they have a whole day or week to do it in. And because they don't have that amount of time, they conclude that there is no point in starting. We call this 'binge writing'. Binge writing isn't inherently wrong; it's just that, for busy people, it can greatly reduce the amount of writing they do. The alternative is 'snack writing'. This means short — but regular — writing sessions. We suggest about 1–2 hours a day for graduate students who are writing a dissertation, and about 45–90 minutes a day for researchers trying to increase their publication output.

Many researchers tell us that they couldn't possibly get anything useful written in that amount of time. The good news is that studies (which we have replicated many times in practice) show that academics who write for 30 minutes a day produce, on average, more peer-reviewed publications than academics who write for big blocks of time. But the 'snacks' have to be regular — 45 minutes once a week doesn't work, but 45 minutes a day 5 days a week does wonders. When possible, try snack writing first thing in the morning. Our experience suggests that this increases the

chances of success by minimizing distractions and ensuring that you have sufficient energy to write clever things. However, for snack writing to lead to really high-quality results, you also need to write in a very specific way.

## WHAT IS WRITING?

Before we tell you what writing is, we should tell you what it isn't, at least for the purposes of snack writing.

Writing isn't editing: you should not spend your brief snack-writing time trying to find the perfect word or getting your grammar right. Writing isn't reading journal articles for research: write first and read afterwards, so that your writing shows you what you need to read. Writing isn't referencing: when you make that killer argument and want to reference Smith and Brown (2006; or maybe it was 2007?), don't stop and look it up. Write "Smith & Brown (200?)" and keep going. You can look up the reference later. Furthermore, writing is not formatting, literature searching, photocopying, e-mailing or nosing around on Facebook. Writing — at least for your snack-writing sessions — means putting new words on the page or substantially rewriting existing words.

So, you might ask, when do you do all the editing, reading and other associated tasks? The answer is, any time in the other 23 hours and 15 minutes of the day — just not during your snack-writing time.

So stop waiting to feel ready. Get started with some short and regular writing snacks. What you write won't be perfect at first, but you will be on your way to becoming a prolific academic writer. ■

Maria Gardiner and Hugh Kearns lecture and research in psychology at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia, and run workshops for graduate students and advisers ([see itthinkwell.com.au](http://www.ithinkwell.com.au)).

## TOP TIPS

## How to get out of a dissertation-writing rut

- Write before you feel ready — because you might never feel ready. It's amazing how people magically feel ready when there is an imminent deadline.
- Don't wait to have a clear picture of the paper. As you start putting down your ideas, you may actually clarify them.
- Snack write — work in short, frequent bursts instead of waiting to sit down for big blocks of time. Those blocks hardly ever come, and when they do, they don't usually get used very productively.
- Set specific times in your schedule for writing — don't leave it to chance, because

chances are it won't happen.

- Writing means putting new words on the page or substantially rewriting old words. It does not mean editing, reading, referencing or formatting — and it definitely does not mean composing e-mails.
- If you refrain from writing because you worry that what you write won't be good enough, try noting the adage that to write well, you first have to write.
- To really increase the quality and quantity of your writing, get feedback from mentors and colleagues — it can be painful, but it works. *M.G. and H.K.*



## Writing as a process:

In the course of producing a piece of writing, you will need to consider and deal with a number of things. These will include:

### 1) Language and its structures: spelling, grammar, sentence and paragraph structures.

*Some useful references:*

Belcher, W.L. (2009) *Writing your Journal Article in 12 Weeks*, Sage Publications, California.

Glasman-Deal, H. (2010) *Science Research Writing for Non-native Speakers of English*, Imperial College Press, London.

Silvia, P. J. (2007) *How to Write a Lot: a practical guide to productive academic writing*, American Psychological Association, Washington DC

Turabian, K. L. (2010) 8<sup>th</sup> Edition *A Manual for Writers of Research papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago

Zinsser. W. (2006) *On Writing Well*, Harper, New York.

### 2) Specific conventions for academic writing in the discipline and knowledge of the required formats for the writing being undertaken for a specific journal.

*Some suggestions:*

Model good (highly cited) papers in prestigious journals in your area

If you are a thesis writer heck out a range of theses in your area to look for good models to follow. The Australian Digital Thesis Repository at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/> will allow you to view a large range of Masters and PhD theses from Australia and New Zealand.

### 3) Cognitive aspects

- What counts as knowledge in this discipline, what kinds of evidence are required for academic argument in this discipline?
- What is the message to be communicated and how clearly does the writer understand it? Good academic writing is underpinned by clarity of thought about the message to be communicated and the arguments to be made.
- How will you go about developing the coherent argument or unifying theme that a thesis must have?

### 4) What strategies do you use for producing text?

- Free-writing
- Generative writing – using prompts or scaffolds to direct free-writing

- Mind mapping
- Brainstorming
- Other creative approaches?
- Time management (controlling distractions including email and internet)
- Setting priorities
- do you usually use snacking or bingeing approaches to the production of text? (there is some evidence in the literature that snacking approaches are associated with greater productivity in writing than bingeing approaches).

Peter Elbow's developmental model of writing:

- do lots of fast writing/free-writing,
- allow yourself to get it wrong and then *develop* what is right
- write so much that you're no longer afraid of ruthless editing

**5) What are your approaches for refining text? – seeing writing as a series of stages from drafting, to revising, editing, then proofreading.**

How to obtain effective feedback and how to use that effectively?

Reading aloud as a way of refining the text. (“Read it aloud with conviction, then play with it until it feels good in the mouth and sounds good to the ear” ).

**6) The social aspects of writing** – discussing your writing with others, getting feedback from others, use of peer feedback, joining writer's groups, collaborative writing and talking with others about writing.

**7) The emotional processes** - that may be associated with writing include feelings of isolation, experiencing the “imposter syndrome”, dealing with the critical and at times random nature of reactions to your writing .

**8) Writing and identity** – a study of academics at the Institute of Education London found that all who remained highly productive writers throughout their careers included the identity of “writer” in their view of themselves.

(see Carnell et al. [http://www.writenow.ac.uk/wdhe/programme\\_abstracts.html#54](http://www.writenow.ac.uk/wdhe/programme_abstracts.html#54))





# DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE WRITING PRACTICES

*Michael Azariadis*



# AIMS OF THIS SESSION:

1. To better understand the broader, social and psychological issues involved in writing
2. To identify the common barriers to writing
3. To develop strategies for optimising writing output and quality



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A clear sentence is no accident. Very  
few sentences come out right the  
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Remember this in moments of  
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***“WRITING IS FRUSTRATING AND COMPLICATED AND TIME-CONSUMING; YET IT IS  
THE MOST REWARDING AND NECESSARY OF ALL SCHOLARLY ACTIVITIES”.***

**“Good novels are written by people who are not frightened.”**

***-George Orwell***

**“The more you write, the more you are capable of writing”**

***-Paul Theroux***

**“Words are a lens to focus one’s mind”**

***-Ayn Rand***

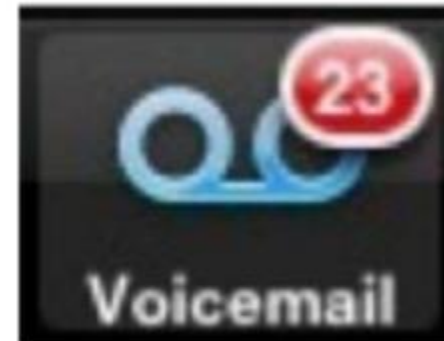
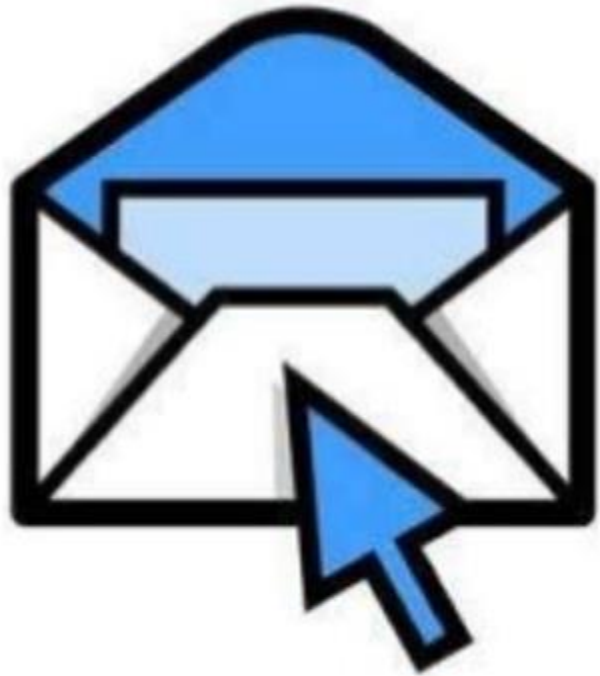
**“The repetition itself becomes the important thing”**

**-Haruki Murakami**

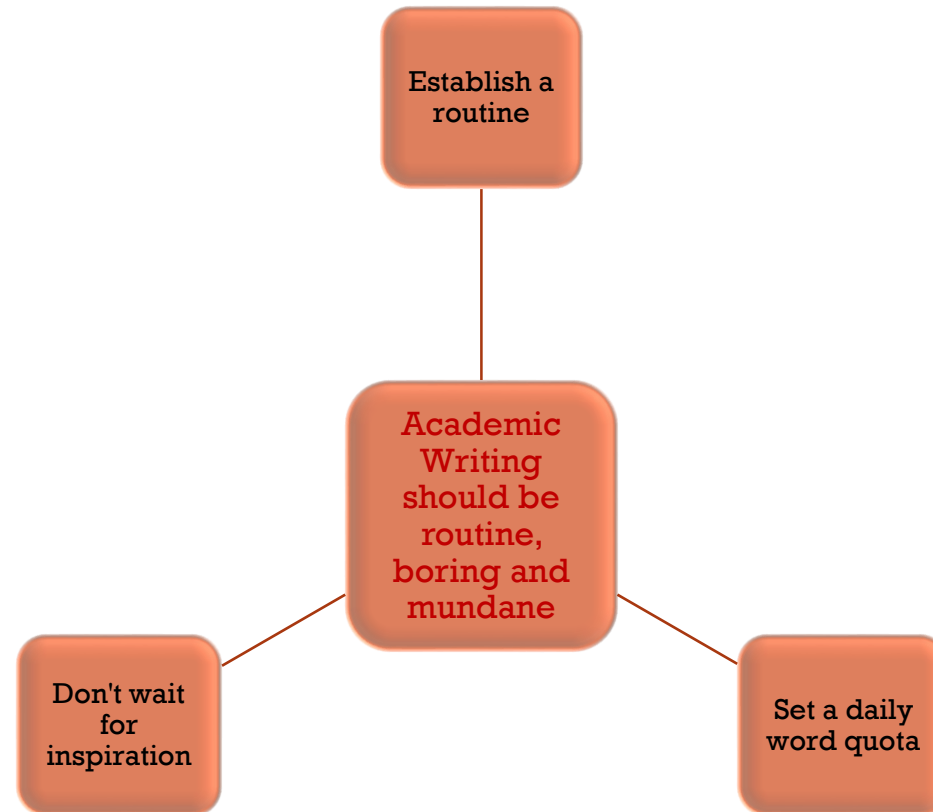
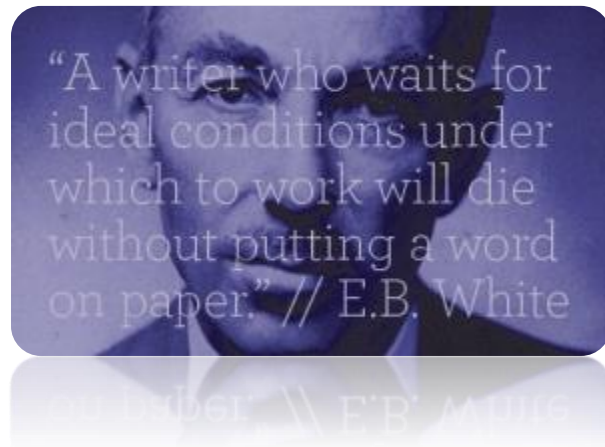


# REACTIONARY WORKFLOW

Occurs when we are constantly responding to incoming information rather than spending time creating (including writing)



# THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSISTENCY





# FINDING FOCUS IN A WORLD OF DISTRACTIONS

The dilemma of information technology

Developing mindfulness



**Think about your current work habits and try to identify any day-to-day practices (or excuses) that are preventing you from focusing on your writing.**

**Develop a plan for engaging in regular, focused productive writing. Consider things like:**

- **Where**
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- **Strategies for prioritising this time**

