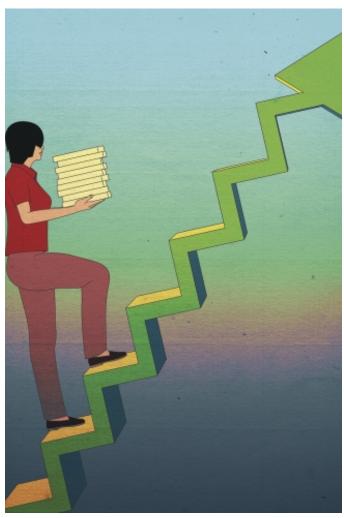# THE CHRONICLE
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ADVICE

My Writing Productivity Pipeline

Write a lot, and often, we are told — but no one shows us how to keep track of all that work

By Erin Marie Furtak │ JUNE 06, 2016

Eric Petersen for The Chronicle

Ever since I was a graduate student, I have tried to recapture the clarity of purpose I had while working on my dissertation. I got up every morning, made myself a cup of coffee, and sat down at my computer to write one thing and one thing only. I wallowed in my data, labored over every word and sentence, and produced something of which I was truly proud.

Fast-forward 10 years. It's been a good run. I've earned tenure and was awarded a few grant projects in succession. I now have, at last count, 14 manuscripts in various states of completion. At one end of the spectrum is a just-published book, and at the other is the initial data analyis for a future article. In the middle is a vast, messy space of manuscripts that are partially or mostly complete, as well as those either under review or facing "revise and resubmit" deadlines.

Clearly the luxury of working on one big thing at a time is completely and hopelessly gone. My new reality is the constant challenge of keeping all of these different manuscripts moving steadily along, so that I have a relatively reliable rate of scholarly productivity. In my field, that means publishing articles in top-tier, peer-reviewed journals.

In academe the signal we get is to write often, and as much as we can. But no one teaches us how to keep track of so many different projects, which pull us in multiple directions conceptually and theoretically and even physically (in the case of data collection and meetings with writing collaborators). Incremental progress made on multiple manuscripts can start to feel like no progress made on anything.

A common bit of wisdom I've heard shared among academics is the 2-2-2 rule: Always have two manuscripts in preparation, two under review, and two in press. While that captures the need to have manuscripts in various stages at all times, there are many more categories than those three.

A few year ago, lamenting the challenges of this juggling act, senior scholars in my department advised me to start thinking about my manuscripts as occupying different places in a pipeline, with proposals on one end and published articles at the other. The goal: Keep your papers distributed along that pipeline, and flowing through.

I adopted their advice and made it my own by creating 11 places along the pipeline into which I organize my work. My organizational strategy is decidedly low-tech: a daily planner and Post-it notes. But this could easily be done on a laptop. Here are my 11 manuscript categories and what falls into each one:

- **Conceiving new ideas.** In this category go the sparks and glimmers of new writing projects and grant ideas that are just coming together. They're undeveloped but have crystallized enough to be put on a sticky note. These are usually things that I'm thinking about proposing for a conference paper or for a new research proposal.
- **Draft proposals.** In my field, faculty members are expected to apply for federal or foundation grants, so most of my writing projects start out as research proposals sent to external agencies.

- **Proposals under review.** Once I've submitted the grant proposals, they move to this category and can sometimes sit there for months as they undergo peer review. This is also the place where I put book proposals and manuscripts for special issues of journals to which I'm contributing as an editor or author.

- **Data collection.** Usually, once a project gets funded, the next thing I do is start collecting data. In other fields, outside the social and natural sciences, the corollaries here would be things like doing archival or library research.

- **Data analysis.** Early in my career, an associate dean gave me this great piece of advice: Never make the mistake of being too linear in your research and writing. That is, carve off small pieces of a large project and publish them, even while the main research questions of the study are still in play. Those small pieces could take the form of a brief case study or a publication about a new instrument. The point is to break off small pieces for data analysis even while I'm still collecting data.

- **Manuscripts in draft form.** A draft goes into this category as soon as I have a pretty good idea of what it might look like and where I might submit it. Everything here is in some state of data analysis or write-up. It's almost always my biggest category, because it includes papers that are just outlined as well as those that are pretty far along.

- **Almost ready for submission.** Here is the first stop for a finished paper. This is an important category, because it differentiates the papers that might require months more of analysis and writing from those that are more or less finished and ready for a conference or external review.

- **Manuscripts under review.** This is the other section that always makes me feel good, because it means that these writing projects are off of my plate for the time being, as someone else decides whether or not they should be accepted.

- **In revision.** Pretty much every manuscript gets a revise-and-resubmit, or some form of revision, before it is officially accepted for publication. I put even my rejected papers in this group because, of course, they're going to have to be revised before I submit them elsewhere. I use a sticky note for the date a manuscript needs to be resubmitted to remind me of the deadline.

- **Revisions under review.** I love this group of manuscripts because they have a much higher chance of being accepted. If a manuscript makes it into this group, it means

that I've received suggestions from the editors, have attended to those issues, and written them a thoughtful and detailed letter. Now all I'm waiting on is word that the editors and reviewers have approved my changes, have any objections to them, and/or have come up with even more changes they want me to make (as happened to me recently). Once my papers come back from review, they usually shift back and forth between this category and the previous one, as I make further changes and resubmit.

- **In press and published.** This is my favorite category of all. A manuscript that makes it to this point exits my pipeline altogether and lands happily on my CV.

For a while, I actually had my writing pipeline on a magnet board in my office that I looked at every day. Now that I'm post-tenure, I just keep it on a page in my daily planner. Once every few weeks, I update it. If none of my manuscripts have changed positions, that catches my attention, and I start asking myself questions: Why wasn't I writing enough? Why haven't I made progress? Am I the holdup? Or is something going on with one of my co-authors? How can I better plan my time in the next few weeks to actually get something moving forward?

If a lot of papers have been stuck at a single spot on the pipeline for a while, it might be time to pick off the one that's most finished and commit to getting it moved to the next category. Similarly, if a paper has been under review for a long time, maybe it's time to contact the editors to ask for an update.

However you organize your writing pipeline, it can help you figure out how to proceed with your projects. For example, if you have a lot of papers that are in the conceptualization stages but nothing under review, it might be a good time to pick one of the papers that is the furthest along and get it under review, rather than try to move all of those papers forward simultaneously.

Similarly, if you have a lot of manuscripts that have been rejected, and you need to determine where else to submit them — I always view a rejection as a revise-and-resubmit, but to another journal — then it might be time to focus on getting those papers back out and under review elsewhere.

A tracking system like this helps you analyze where to focus your efforts and gives you a reason to celebrate when a manuscript moves from one category to the next. For me, writing down all of my projects in one place, no matter how many there are, helps me sleep better at night.

I'm pretty sure that, until I retire, I'll never regain the clarity and simplicity of purpose of my dissertation-writing days. However, with my productivity pipeline, I can still sit down with that cup of coffee and get into writing, since I know the other projects are also moving along.

Erin Marie Furtak is an associate professor of education at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

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