

# How to Write When You Don't Want to Write

Generative techniques to spark your writing

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# Objectives

- To dispel certain (toxic) myths about academic writing
- To understand that *writing is thinking* and that quality writing comes through revising and editing
- To understand the benefits of serial writing
- To become familiar with techniques for freeing up your writing
- To feel empowered to try new techniques and confident with the ones you have already



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# Academic Writing

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# A few myths...

- **Myth: Only students write badly**

In fact, *everyone* writes badly the first time and through revising/editing, we arrive at something passable.

- **Myth: You need to have your thoughts in order before you start writing**

However, the best way to unblock yourself is by *writing*.

- **Myth: You write best when you feel like it**

But these moments tend to be *few and far between*.

- **Myth: You should only write when you have long periods of time to write**

But often these don't come and you can burn yourself by writing for too long.

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# Concerns about writing

- Fear of feedback
- Fatigue
- Boredom
- Lack of momentum
- Not writing often enough
- Fear of failure; fear of success
- Feeling you've lost your way
- Feeling that your writing isn't good enough
- Feeling that you should have more to show for the amount of time that has passed

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# Writer's block

- A family of issues surrounding trouble producing writing
- Often used to explain *why* we're not writing
- Often happens because we think that we:
  - Need to have perfect ideas before writing
  - Want to feel sure before writing
  - Feel overwhelmed by the amount to do
- However, blocked moments are a common, perhaps universal aspect of writing! We will be discussing ways of mitigating and getting past blocks, particularly through ***seeing blocks as opportunities for writing.***



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# Writing as thinking

- You figure out what you think and believe *by writing*
- When you write, you connect ideas and find your own voice and direction
- Writing clarifies your thinking
- The magic of writing comes in the editing, as you continuously refine your thoughts
- The ‘seamless’ writing we encounter in published works is the result of *many* cycles of revisions and edits

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# Serial writing

- Frequent, regular and directed
- Composed of small tasks and sessions connected to each other
- Composed of *different types* of regular writing such as structured writing, generative techniques (such that we'll discuss today), revising and editing, etc.
- *Patterns* of writing – and *not* writing! A cadence of production that sustains your writing
- Applies to drafts and revisions. Good writing is essentially a *series of revisions*



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# Writing as process

- Interconnected steps, events and moments
- Viewing writing as a process is less stressful and more balanced and positive
- Momentum and ideas come from writing regularly, in short moments
- ‘Complete’ ideas never come in one sitting or final pushes
- Short writing activities help you feel connected to your writing, so it’s easier the next time to write
- Overall productivity is heightened



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# No one right way to write

- There are many different approaches to writing, and you will find what works best for you
- Guilt that you're not 'doing it right' isn't productive. Avoid beating yourself up
- You will learn your own productive rhythms, which include time for *not* writing!
- **But**, you should try to let go of the worry that you need to say everything you need to in one go!

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# Techniques



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# Dissertation journal

- Any notebook or word-processing doc will do
- For your eyes only!
- Make it *yours*: colourful, playful, etc.
- Date the entries for future reference
- Highly recommended
- Develops your voice
- Is a record of your thought processes
- Can be a source of refuge and calm

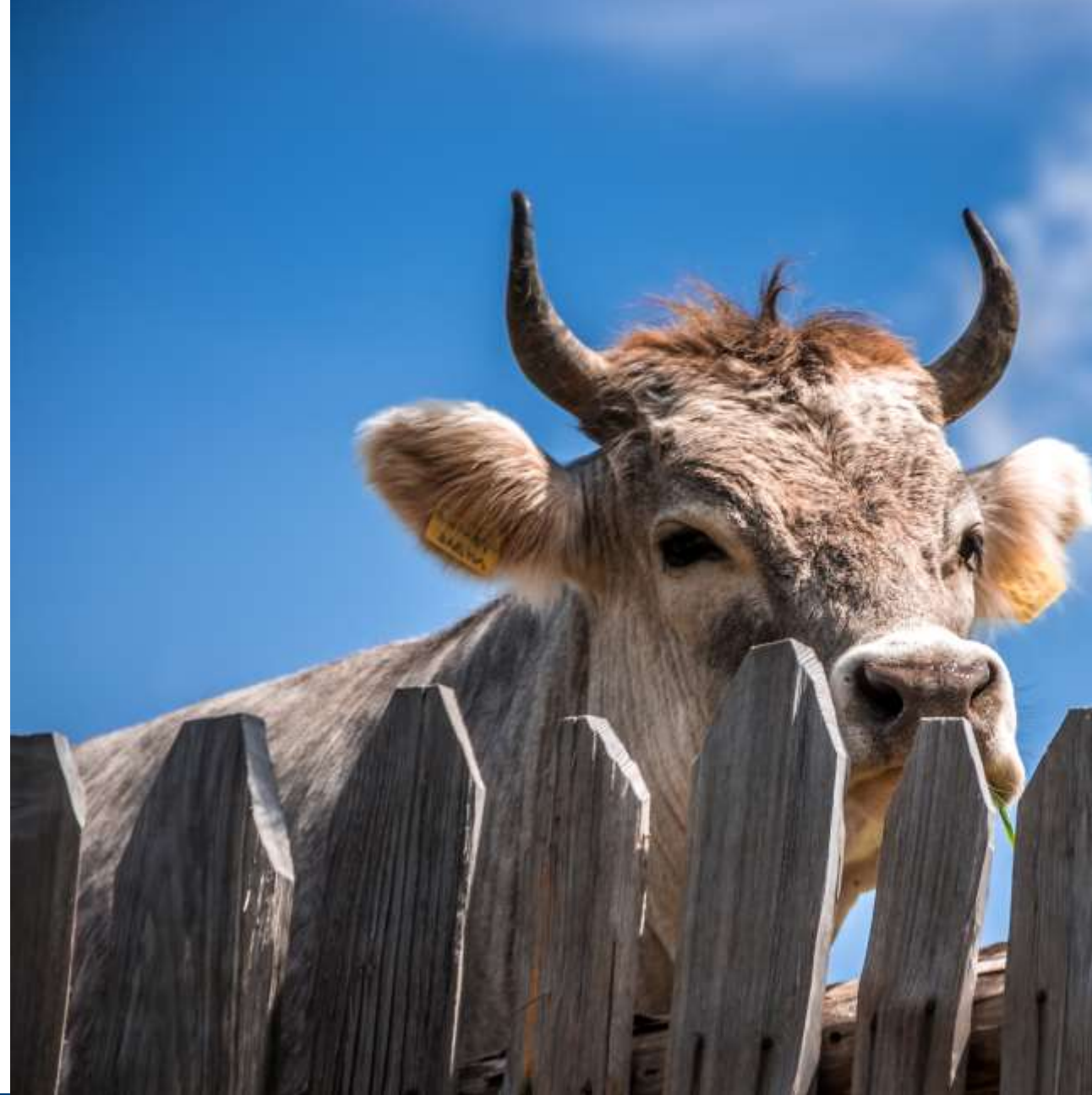
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# Ring fence your writing time

- Set a time to write every day
- Protect the time – it's your time
- It's self care to know that you have time to write
- The 'things you don't want to do' lose their power over you a bit

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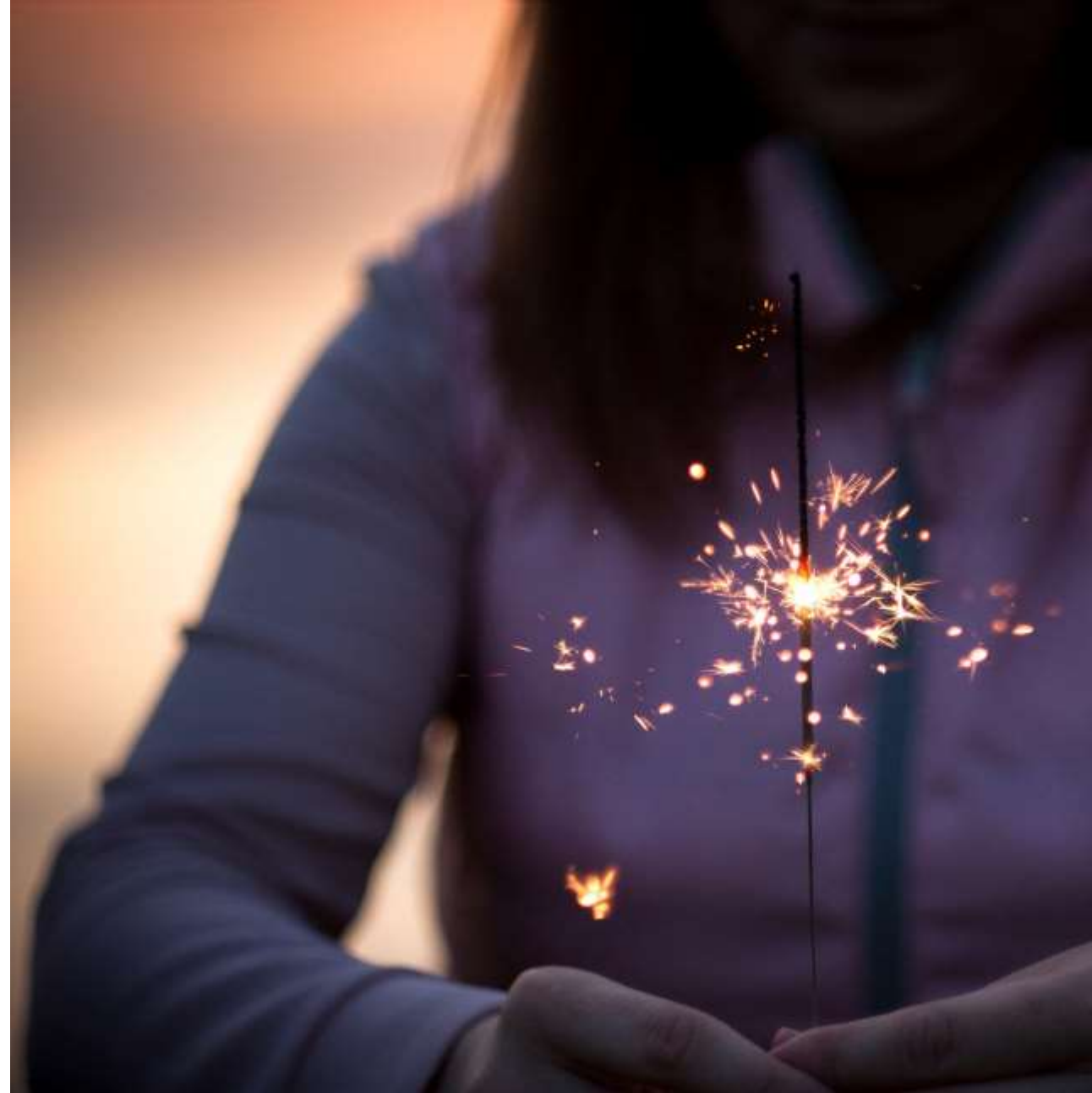
# Activities to spark writing

Each of these techniques can help start your writing – and build confidence – by writing *something*:

1. **Brainstorm** sections
2. **Prompts** for free writing
3. **Timed writing** (e.g., Pomodoro technique)
4. **Generative writing**: structured and focused
5. **Social writing** / writing with a buddy
6. **Loosen your brain**: approaching questions/problems obliquely

Once you've tried a technique, reflect on what happened. Have you collected anything useful? Harvest and expand on what's usable.

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# Brainstorm sections

You can do this at any stage of your writing:

- Name headings and sub-headings
- Jot down ideas for each section
- Assign provisional word counts
- Make to-do lists for each section

You then have a road map and *manageable* chunks of writing to focus on.

The trick is to break your writing down into a series of *manageable* tasks.



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# Prompts

Free write with a timer (e.g. for 10 minutes).

Writing occurs, text is generated.

- 'What I am most interested in is...'
- 'The studies that inspired me most are...'
- 'What I want to look at is...'
- 'The idea that I keep coming back to is...'
- 'Why I have nothing to write about...'
- 'The next thing I want to write about is...'
- 'My work relates to others' in that...'
- 'My contribution to knowledge (research/theory/practice) is...'
- 'There are implications for...'

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# Timed writing

- Rounds of short writing periods coupled with short break periods
- **Pomodoro technique:** 25 minutes of writing + 5 minutes breaks. After four rounds, take a longer break
- Helps to minimise fatigue
- Helps to manage distractions and maintain focus and motivation
- Lots of Pomodoro timers online or try <https://www.forestapp.cc/> to watch trees grow!

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# Generative writing

- More structured and focused than free writing, but still for your eyes only
- Focus on actual sections of your dissertation and what you'd like to write for them
- Possibly imagine an audience (such as your fellow students) reading your writing
- Write in sentences
- Discuss the writing with a friend
- *'All writing is good enough for the stage we're at'*



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# Social writing

- Write with a friend or small group
- Write silently or comment on each others' writing
- Time the sessions / have some structure
- Self-confidence and engagement is cultivated by pooling, discussing and sharing perspectives
- **Your librarian can help you set up peer-support writing groups!**



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# Loosen your brain

- Write in verse
- Write a letter or memo
- Alternate writing hands
- Make a mind-map (e.g., using <https://www.mindmeister.com/>)
- Make a model (e.g., with blocks or Lego)
- Paint a picture
- Take a walk, make a meal, fold laundry, clean the bathroom, etc.
- Dance your PhD (look it up on YouTube!)

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# Something to try...

To kick-start your writing perhaps try cycles of:

1. Writing to prompts
2. Free-your-brain activities
3. Generative writing and *talking* about it
4. Structured social writing

It can also help to block out time in your diary to write so that you are reassured the writing moments will be there.

**It is *never* too late to start these techniques and see benefits!**

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# Conclusion



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# In sum

- When we write, we activate thinking
- Writing doesn't come after research, it's an integral part of the thinking process itself
- Quality writing comes through revising/editing
- Writing can be an 'animating activity' and an 'enjoyable adventure in thought' as opposed to an anxiety-ridden process (Badley 2015)
- Writing doesn't just beget more writing, it develops fluency and reinforces that you actually *can* write!



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# A few more tips...

- Write before anything else (if possible)
- Write down your concerns and then write *in spite* of them
- Finish today's writing by defining tomorrow's (i.e., 'park on a slope')
- Don't worry about done or undone writing, just keep moving forward
- Think about how much you have already written in your life
- Make a change, *any* change. It takes 21 days to start new habits.
- Baby steps really *do* add up!

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# Sensible and empathetic books about writing

- Murray, R. (2011). *How to write a thesis*. **Available as ebook on iDiscover**
- Nice review of Murray's book:  
**<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2002/oct/16/highereducation.books>**
- Sword, H. (2017). *Air & light & time & space: How successful academics write*. **Available as ebook on iDiscover**



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# Discussion questions

- Which of these strategies do you find most compelling or think will be most useful?
- What barriers, if any, do you foresee?



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# Thank You

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