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# Write No Matter What

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ADVICE FOR ACADEMICS

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**C**learing the decks" is the mistaken belief that we should take care of all our other obligations before we can really get going on our writing. It is one of the most widespread and damaging myths in academe.

In a recent faculty writing workshop, six colleagues committed to trying the three taming techniques on their own stalled project. They each agreed to organize a project box and write fifteen minutes a day, either on their project or in a ventilation file. We would meet in a week to explore what happened and decide on next steps.

The day before our second meeting, we all got an e-mail from T. explaining that she couldn't attend our meeting and that she hadn't been able to use any of the techniques. There was just too much going on right now, it hadn't been an opportune week for writing, and now grading had to take precedence over this week's meeting. She would be out of town the following week, but she hoped she could continue with the group once things settled down, because she definitely wanted to get back to her long-deflected project.

Obviously the "cleared-deck" fantasy (among other issues) had T. in its grip—and alas, it still does. She told us she wanted and needed to write her next book. She had been confident she could find fifteen minutes a day for it. Our workshop was right before spring break, so she had a full week ahead of her without classes. Yet she still believed there was too much else she had to do instead, before even trying the three taming techniques on her stalled book project.

We had discussed A, B, and C time in our first meeting, so she knew that brief writing contact could and should come before things like grading. She knew that frequent low-stress contact with a writing project is the secret to long-term productivity. In spite of all the information and suggestions she was given—and a supportive group of colleagues—she was not able to manage even fifteen minutes a day connecting with her book over spring break. She believed—really believed—she needed to wait to write until "things cleared up."

The rest of the group did not succumb to this fantasy. They too had other things that they needed to do. They too believed this wasn't the best week to be writing. They saw how often they were tempted, each day, to put off even a fifteen-minute commitment. But they did not—the five others were able to use the techniques, which allowed them to reconnect with their stalled projects and move forward. Once they experienced even a little progress, they felt so much relief—stalled projects drain a tremendous amount of energy. The taming techniques allowed them to feel better about their projects and about themselves, and therefore to make better choices about their next steps.

Other members of the workshop now meet regularly as a productive writing group. But our deck-clearing colleague has not rejoined them. For months she was invited, and is still on the e-mail list, but she has remained "too busy" to spend time on the book project that she said she both wanted and needed to complete. Obviously there is something deeper going on. But she won't be able to address it until she lets go of her cover story—that she has to clear the decks before she has time to write.

The point is that *things never clear up*. They don't even reliably settle down. Our inbox is always full. Our decks are always crowded. There is always more going on than we want or expect. In spite of this, we can find ways to honor our writing by putting it first and making sure it gets time and attention. Otherwise, everything *but* our writing will get done. Some days will be more crowded and demanding than others, but all the nonwriting stuff that clamors for our attention will be taken care of. Even when—I think especially when—we devote brief, frequent time to our writing.

Your reverse day planner tells how you are choosing to spend your time. As you know, it showed me that I was spending my best time on e-mail and course preparation. Most of us have jam-packed lives, and it is never easy to find long periods of uninterrupted time to write. We don't need big blocks of time, but we do need regular, brief writing sessions. Every day, not "when things settle down."

So why is protecting brief daily writing time so hard? Partly it's the misleading academic schedule, with its illusory free time "later"—on weekends, or between semesters, or in the summer. We truly believe that then we will have the time that we can't possibly spare right now.

The reality is that while we may feel less pressure when classes and committees are not in full swing, our decks will still be piled high with all the stuff we've delayed, like time with the family, relaxation, and home maintenance.

Another reason it's hard to see through this fantasy is that being "too busy" is an acceptable way to avoid the uncomfortable feelings that always accompany writing projects. I'm sure that's what is going on with T., our "too much on my plate right now" colleague. She has unacknowledged emotional baggage attached to her project, and busyness gives her a way to avoid confronting it directly. But her avoidance comes at a tremendous cost.

The longer we are away from a project, the worse we feel and the harder it is for us to reconnect with it. Rather than using the ventilation file and the insights of colleagues to acknowledge our jumbled, unpleasant feelings, we focus on all the other demands on our time. It is easy to blame them for keeping us from writing. This is mostly unconscious, but that's how myths work. We will explore how to deal more effectively with stalled projects in chapter 22. For now, notice how feeling "too busy" can be both true and an internally created obstacle.

You can begin to dissolve your beliefs about needing to clear the decks by acknowledging the reality of your life. It is—and probably always will be—demanding. Over just one year, among the five members of my faculty writing group, one of us was in a near-fatal car accident (which required months of recovery); a daughter became seriously ill; a department chair died; elderly parents had multiple crises; an unwarranted lawsuit was filed; heirloom furniture was smashed by a moving company; major dental work was required. Meanwhile, each of us had departmental crises to address and the full complement of conferences, public lectures, and family trips.

Plus we dealt with the usual professional obligations—class preparation, committee meetings, reports, letters of recommendation, and grades. This is just what happens in our professional lives. Yet in spite of all these challenges—major and minor, unexpected and expected—each of the group members found ways to keep in touch with their projects and make progress on them.

Letting go of the delusion that things are going to settle down (soon

or someday) frees us to figure out how to secure writing time right now, in the midst of our many current commitments. If your heart sinks at this prospect, it may be because you believe you can't possibly put one more obligation—like writing—into your life right now. It already feels like your life is full to bursting, and you can't imagine adding anything more.

The key to challenging the cleared-deck myth is to remember that our scholarly work is not just one more unwelcome obligation. It is a *voluntary commitment*—what we need to do to be happy and successful in our chosen field. Scholarly writing should be an activity we respect and believe in. It is not just "one more thing." It is the main thing in our professional lives. It can be a pleasant, rewarding thing—once we learn how to give ourselves frequent low-stress, high-reward encounters in a supportive environment with a project we care about.

Our writing times can become a refuge, because every day we can devote ourselves to something we believe in. In securing time for our scholarly work, we enact our commitment to questions and problems that matter to us. This is the life we have worked so hard to be part of. Prioritizing and protecting small units of time each day for our scholarly work is how we honor our commitment to it.

In the chapter on taming techniques, I suggested that we think of our writing projects as pets waiting patiently for their daily walk. If I waited until my decks were clear to walk my dog, she would never get out of the house. It is easy for me to forget that I *get* to walk my dog—it's a privilege, not just another obligation. Sometimes I just have enough time to go around the block with her, but for at least a few minutes each day I can spend relaxed and happy time outdoors with my dog. It decreases my anxiety, it is the right thing to do, and it provides a welcome respite.

This is exactly how writing can feel, if we make it into a valued priority, not just one more obligation. It is a privilege to be able to do our scholarly work in the midst of the many other demands of our profession. When life feels overwhelming, we can give ourselves the solace and refuge of regular writing time. If we connect with our project every day—even briefly—it becomes much easier to accomplish the many other things "on deck" that need to be done.

## 13 } THE HOSTILE READER FEAR

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**F**ear of being criticized can hamper academic writing from conception to submission. At every step of the writing process it leads us to defend ourselves against possible attack.

Like the other myths that block academic writing, the “hostile reader fear” can haunt us whenever we sit down to write.

This fear is not unwarranted. Our academic work will indeed be scrutinized by a series of readers. Some of these readers may be highly critical—even snide and vicious. And that will hurt. Taking into account what others might say about our work is a valuable way to make what we write more thorough and comprehensive. But the hostile reader fear goes further—it is a deep, often unrecognized fear of being wounded, maybe even destroyed, by what someone else has to say about our work.

The hostile reader fear can be a major contributor to writer’s block. It can silence us completely unless we can find skillful ways to respond to it. As one of my colleagues pointed out, “The easiest way to avoid being told you are a crappy writer is not to write anything at all.”

Fear of being attacked also leads us to try (and of course fail) to write something impervious to all criticism. This encourages the worst kind of academic writing—oblique and baroque, pugnacious and grandiose, or mechanical and sterile. No matter what our field, fending off an imaginary hostile reader deflects, inhibits, and impairs our scholarly work.

The academic system is designed to offer continuous scrutiny. If the system is working, our writing will improve through the critical response of others. But the review process is not designed to be warm and fuzzy. It feels—and sometimes is—unsafe. So we need to find ways to work with a review system that can seem cruel and arbitrary, even if its admirable goal is to ensure quality scholarship.

When we’re in the grip of the hostile reader fear, submitting our work makes us feel as if we are throwing ourselves to the wolves. Our colleagues can (and may) reduce our best efforts to rubble. Review-

ers can (and may) tear our best offerings into bloody shreds. Who can possibly do good work when imagining—and trying to avoid—devastating attacks?

The opposite of the hostile reader fear is the euphoric reader hope. When I was interviewing British literary editor Diana Athill, she told me that much of her job involved telling her writers (including V. S. Naipaul and Jean Rhys) over and over, “Darling, you’re wonderful.” It was a revelation to me that even the successful writers she edited continually craved affirmation.

Lots of us are like Ralphie in *A Christmas Story*, who dreams his teacher will swoon and write A+++++ on his Red Ryder BB gun essay. Instead she corrects his grammar, gives him a C+, and warns him, “You’ll shoot your eye out.” We need to find a realistic middle path between our hope for swoons and our fear of humiliation.

In other words, academic writing can trigger two demons we need to find ways to befriend: unrealistic hopes of being understood and admired, and unrealistic fears of being mercilessly attacked. Here are four strategies that can help.

First, we can remember that when our work is evaluated negatively, we ourselves are not being criticized. We need to *depersonalize* the experience, because critical comments are about our scholarly work, not us. Hard as it is to maintain this distinction, it is crucial to our academic well-being. Scholarly work is our chosen craft. It is what we do, not who we are. Someone else’s red ink on our drafts is not a direct attack on us. It is just their current response to what we have currently produced. We have not been evaluated; an example of our scholarly work has.

Second, we can *reframe* imagined future criticism as a form of support. Careful critique is a gift, and we should hope for valuable guidance from future readers, rather than simply dreading their cruel comments. When colleagues or reviewers give us detailed feedback, they give us (with little or no compensation) their time and attention. They are helping us find ways to make our work better. While you can’t predict what kinds of comments your work will receive, you can write in the hope of receiving helpful feedback. So imagine future criticism as a gift that can strengthen your work, rather than as a persecution.

Your ventilation file can be a third coping strategy. The ventila-

tion file is a safe place to find out exactly what your imaginary hostile reader has to say about your work, since you are probably your own worst critic. Once you *acknowledge the critic-in-your-head*, you've got a lot less to fear. So go for broke: use your ventilation file to express whatever you think really vicious readers might say. Beat them to the punch. Then deal courageously with whatever this (hypothetical) hostile reader tells you.

No advisor, colleague, or reviewer can truly demolish you unless they trigger your own deepest fears about your work. The hostile reader you really need to "invite in for tea" is your own projection. Let the ventilation file express the worst you can imagine, then respond as compassionately as you can. Prove to yourself that you can survive whatever nastiness your imagination can come up with.

A fourth strategy is to *substitute a real person*—supportive and trustworthy—in place of an imaginary hostile reader. This tactic helped me when I was a graduate student. A young professor at another institution knew I was having writing troubles, and he suggested that I write my dissertation "to him." This helped me because he actually valued my topic. My deepest fear was that my dissertation committee would be contemptuous of my attempt to do scholarly work on country music. Deep down I feared they would trash someone studying what they thought was trash. Imagining my professor-friend as a future supportive reader helped me focus on doing the work rather than on my fears of being dismissed or ridiculed. It helped me imagine constructive editing rather than destructive criticism. And it allowed me (mostly) to let go of whatever I was afraid awaited me when I finally submitted my dissertation for the committee's review.

If the hostile reader fear is hampering your writing, try these four strategies. When you find yourself assuming hostility from future readers, realize what you are doing, write about it in your ventilation file, and get back to work.

Why not imagine a helpful (if not euphoric) reader instead? The reality is that no matter what you write, you probably won't be given an A++, but you probably won't be permanently destroyed either. Respond to your fears of future criticism with these support strategies, and remember that you can survive—even benefit from—what actual readers will eventually offer.

## 14 } COMPARED WITH X

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**C**omparative evaluation is the lingua franca of academe. We have been getting grades since kindergarten, and most of us have done pretty well in this system. We have come to expect that our hard work will always place us at the top of the class.

Then we get to graduate school and find ourselves surrounded by lots of other high achievers, also used to being "the best." We are faced, maybe for the first time, with not setting the curve. This feels like we are not measuring up. Which can lead to the sense that "compared with X" (some exceptionally productive colleague) we are less than and falling behind.

Most writing myths come from beliefs that have some basis in reality. The painful truth here is that you may never again be able to count on "setting the curve" or being "the best." Chances are good that no matter how hard you work, you will be behind someone else, somewhere, on some measure. You may be prolific, but not in the right journals. You may be in the right journals, but not often enough. You may have written a book, but others have written several. You too may have written several books, but they were not published with equally prestigious presses. You may have published ten books with prestigious presses, but they are not having as much influence as someone else's. And on it goes. "Compared with X" always has the power to make us feel bad.

So the first step in dealing with destructive comparison is to accept that there will always be "better than you" scholars. Your days of setting the curve may be over. You have colleagues who are more eloquent, insightful, and productive than you are. The only solution to this situation is to accept it and let it go. Holding on to comparisons—whether positive or negative—keeps us trapped. Berating ourselves for our perceived writing inadequacies guarantees misery.

But so does taking too much pride in our comparative productivity—the flipside of feeling "less than" is to seek ways to feel

"more than." Some of us try to become more productive, more influential, more successful at publication than specific other colleagues. Writing becomes a way to keep score and gloat. It's a way to hold on to that familiar but increasingly elusive top-student status by trying to turn everyone else into also-rans.

Living by comparisons misshapes our character as well as our writing. It puts the focus on outside evaluation (real or imagined) rather than on doing our own best work. Yes, we are always being evaluated, but we need not turn "being the best" into a moral imperative. We stay both "right-sized" and "write-sized" by focusing on making valuable contributions to the field, rather than on how many publications we can crank out compared with others.

There is no single measure of academic writing worthiness. Hiring, tenure, and promotion committees establish guidelines for scholarly productivity that we must of course take seriously, and during professional reviews we get comparative feedback that we must take into account. But don't internalize this feedback either as an accurate assessment of the quality of your scholarly writing or as a measure of your true worth as a human being.

Institutional reviews represent how particular colleagues think you are measuring up against their (often self-interested) interpretation of strategically vague criteria. It is information you need to have to make wise decisions about your perceived success at this moment in this academic circumstance. It is a stressful process, but it need not be debilitating. Accept it for what it is—feedback on where you stand in relation to these people and these institutional norms. Do not let the review process trigger the more personal "compared with X" myth.

This myth is so devastating because it cuts to the heart of who we think we should be as scholars. We want to excel, stand out, and be recognized as particularly worthy. Instead of focusing on our scholarly work as a craft, we come to see it as a measure of our essential worth. That's when our scholarship becomes tangled up in measuring ourselves against selected others in our department, field, university, nation, the world, and the past. We compare their magnificent finished products to our own paltry efforts and feel inadequate.

This obsession with comparison is counterproductive at best and paralyzing at worst. It keeps us focused on someone else's writing

strengths and weaknesses while preventing us from feeling safe and comfortable with our own. People differ not only in innate ability, skills, and training but also in what can be called writing temperaments. Some people love to write and do so easily and well. Others dislike writing but have learned techniques that help make it more satisfying. Others resent being "forced" to write, but they find ways to do it anyway. Comparing our own process with that of others who have different writing temperaments is unhelpful. Instead, we can learn to work effectively with who we are, drawing on techniques that enviable others may have mastered.

A premise of this book is that academic writing requires a supportive environment—both externally and internally. Whatever does not produce a supportive writing environment should be identified and protected against. In my role as individual writing coach, I help colleagues identify and experiment with various techniques and strategies. The goal is to help each of them find ways to become their own writing coach.

Would an effective coach berate you for being "worse" or "behind" or "too slow" compared with someone else? Would he or she constantly throw that person's achievements in your face, so that you feel like a hopeless failure? Of course not, because bullying is not motivating.

Would an effective coach make derogatory remarks about your talented peers, so you can find a way to feel better about your own abilities? Would he or she encourage you to cut them down to size so you can feel big? Of course not, because this strategy wouldn't help you develop your own writing skills.

A good coach works with your strengths and helps you figure out how to meet your own goals. The antidote to chronic comparison is to focus on giving yourself what you need in order to do your best scholarly work.

Almost everyone struggles with writing doubts and fears and obstacles, even those who seem to be effortlessly producing great work. I have talked with colleagues who are blocked and colleagues who are prolific, and they describe the same insecurities and anxieties. The difference is that the prolific ones use techniques that work for them. We have similar writing hopes, fears, and struggles, but some of us

have found our own combination of effective writing techniques—by focusing on doing our own best work, not on how we measure up compared with others.

Kevin, a participant in a writing workshop at another university, offered me this example of how a simple change in punctuation can release us from the comparison trap. We are always wondering, he said, if we are good enough. But what if instead we know that our work is good and believe that is enough? He illustrated this by writing “Good enough?” and then crossing out the question mark and adding two periods. “Good. Enough.” It made all the difference.

To counteract the debilitating effects of comparison, commit to doing your own work with as much skill and integrity as you can. Be pleased, even grateful, that you share a department, university, field, or world with dazzling scholars-who-are-not-you. Learn what you can from them, let them inspire you, but stay connected to your own writing. Remember, no one but you can do your project. Forget about “colleague X,” and focus instead on what you can do for your project. Make it good. That is enough.

## 15 } THE PERFECT FIRST SENTENCE

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**S**ome of my colleagues can’t begin writing until they have found the Perfect First Sentence. They spend hours seeking just the right words, tinkering with a single sentence that never quite captures what they are trying to say. Frustrated and discouraged, with little to show for their hours of intense effort, they eventually conclude that they “just can’t write.”

If this is you, there are several techniques that can honor your desire to get the words just right but give you more effective routes to achieving that goal. The key to dispelling the “perfect first sentence” myth is to understand that there are at least four phases to writing: prewriting, drafting, revision, and editing.

The good news is, if you struggle with the Perfect First Sentence myth, you will enjoy the last two phases: revising and editing. But what you need first are effective ways to prewrite and draft. Obviously you can’t revise and edit material that doesn’t yet exist. Prewriting and drafting let you create rough approximations of material that you *then* polish into a finished product.

All writing requires prewriting. This is the phase after your content elements have been gathered but before you know exactly how you are going to arrange and present these elements to readers. It is a crucial, invisible, and often underappreciated element in all forms of writing.

Figuring out what we should say—our written content—requires rumination. We need to ponder and explore possibilities, because all writing projects can be organized in many different ways. Perfect First Sentence types are trying to do this in their heads instead of on the page. The search for the right sentence is actually a ruminative process—trying to get the ideas and claims and evidence into effective sequential order. What makes it into a myth is your misguided belief that once you find the right place to start, the whole piece will magically fall into place.

Staying in your head, waiting for a first sentence to coalesce into a

finished structure, doesn't always work. Prewriting offers a different approach. It lets you consider various options for content and structure by filling the page or screen with a number of (temporary) possibilities. These ideas and phrases will be—and should be—imperfect, incomplete, and inadequate. These fragments are a crucial first stage in the evolution of your project.

My high school teachers considered a formal outline to be the only effective prewriting strategy. It was (and still is) excruciating for me to do a linear Roman-numeral plan—it is far too rigid and structured. Instead I use a pen on paper to scrawl disordered ideas or phrases, with lots of arrows, circles, and cross-outs. This gets me in touch with some of the elements of what I think I want to say. It's akin to the "word-cloud" system recommended for corporate brainstorming. My prewriting process gets thoughts out of my head and onto paper in a sloppy nonlinear form. It's a template to get me rolling, even if I barely refer to it later on.

If formal outlines work for you, then by all means keep using them. But if they feel awkward or forced, explore other options. If my handwritten scrawl system seems too old-fashioned, use the screen—a silly font or vibrant color may help you throw down some prewriting elements. Or try putting key words or phrases on Post-it notes or 3×5 cards—these can be rearranged until they seem good enough for now.

Another suggestion is to start with free writing that "doesn't count." Peter Elbow offers a description and specific example in his essay "Freewriting and the Problem of Wheat and Tares."<sup>1</sup> Write whatever comes to your mind about your topic without worrying about syntax, eloquence, grammar, spelling, or punctuation. Do not reread—just go full out. Do not reflect or edit, just talk it out on paper without worrying about coherence. Get the words out there. Focus not on "exactly where I need to start" but on what you have to say in this section. Let the whole mess stand as a temporary first sentence because you know you will be back, later, to create an actual first sentence, once you have completed your first rough draft.

What you want to write, of course, is not the first sentence but a first

1. Chap. 3 in *Writing and Publishing for Academic Authors*, ed. Joseph M. Moxley and Todd Taylor (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).

draft. And it can and should be a real mess. Anne Lamott, in her classic literary writing advice book *Bird by Bird*, talks about "shitty first drafts." I encourage you to adopt her attitude. Know that writing involves stages and that the prewriting and drafting are supposed to be embarrassing messes. No matter how disgusting your first draft is, it still gives you what you need: something solid to develop and polish.

If you struggle with this myth, you need to corral your perfectionism long enough to get your words out, then turn it loose in the revising and editing phases. The scrawled template, sentence fragments and crummy first draft are verbal clay that you fling onto the page in big chunks. No one else will ever see them, and you will shape them into something acceptable later on. But for now you are throwing stuff down, quickly and sloppily, just to pile up some content.

Instead of struggling to find a single sentence that will lead to a perfect final piece, accept that all writing starts out messy. It becomes orderly through revising and editing. Which means that the antidote for the Perfect First Sentence myth is to let yourself fully participate in these two phases of intentional imperfection—prewriting and drafting.

Sloppy writing can provoke overwhelming anxiety in some people. If you are a perfectionist, you hate to write badly, and it feels humiliating, even in the early stages. You want to make sure that your words are "right" at every step of the process, which is why you spend so much time in front of an almost empty screen, polishing and rearranging a few sentences over and over. This is why you get more and more frustrated about how long it takes for you to pile up pages.

Happily, you have just the skills you need to be a gifted reviser and editor. Your perfectionist tendencies can be fully deployed after you have forced yourself to throw down some slop in the general direction of your topic. During revising and editing you will finally be free to honor your deflected desire to get your words exactly right. In revision you can go back to your pile of sentences and choose a good place to start. You might find a nearly perfect first sentence anywhere in your draft—often my first sentence shows up toward the end of my draft, when I've shown myself what I want to say.

During revision, writers tighten and rework—cutting out swaths of words that don't fit, finding an unexpected theme and developing it,

or just eliminating or swapping paragraphs to make things flow better. My revised draft doesn't have much in common with my scrawled notes—but so what? I've managed to create solid material to work with, because I was willing to throw down imperfect approximations of what I was hoping to say.

When editing, you get to polish and perfect your almost-ready-to-be-seen-by-others draft. This can be done section by section, or it can wait until you have a complete version. The point is to keep your perfectionist polishing completely separate from the prewriting, drafting, and revision processes. Get yourself through the anxiety-inducing acceptance of imperfection in the earlier phases, so that during editing you can give free rein to all your perfectionist desires.

The reward for prewriting and drafting is that you (finally!) get to tinker and polish. Now is your chance to make each sentence as clear and concise as possible, with solid grammar, spelling, and punctuation. You can erase all signs of your incoherent prewriting and crummy first drafting and the tentative changes of your rewriting phases. Remember, all good writing starts in messiness so it can head toward perfection.

Be grateful that you are the kind of person who likes to make words come out right. This is a trait that all good writers have and that all academic writing needs. But to be both good *and* productive writers, we must find ways to bracket our desire for perfection until the final phases of the writing process. The place to start is not with a perfect sentence but with some approximations that, through revision and editing, become exactly what we were trying to say all along.

## 16 } ONE MORE SOURCE

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**A**s a young woman, social reformer Jane Addams spent several years trying to find ways to be of service to society. But her preparatory period, she later came to believe, went on far too long. She was too caught up in plans, unable to move forward into action. In her memoir *Twenty Years at Hull House*<sup>1</sup> she borrows a phrase from Leo Tolstoy and calls this “the snare of preparation.”

Spending too much time preparing, rather than getting started, happens often in academe. We can spend months, even years, “getting ready” to write. In scholarly writing there is no natural boundary to the amount of literature we can review, and it can feel safer (and more interesting) to be getting ready to write rather than plunging into actual writing.

Before starting this section I was tempted to reread books by and about Addams and track down the original quote from Tolstoy. I thought about gathering secondary sources on both Tolstoy and Addams to make sure that I understood exactly what each meant. I also considered doing an Internet search to make sure that no one else is using “the snare of preparation” in some other way that would make me look uninformed if I didn’t note it here. I could even have gone in search of another, better phrase to use in this section in case “the snare of preparation” was too obvious, or outdated, or obscure, or clichéd.

In other words, I could have succumbed to the myth of One More Source. We get stuck in the “snare of preparation” when we delay writing until we have gathered even more of what might be relevant scholarship. We stay in “gather and organize” mode, delaying writing and thereby missing deadlines and feeling both incompletely prepared and behind. The snare of preparation keeps us trapped in getting-ready-to-write.

1. (New York: Macmillan, 1912).

Obviously, we all need to be well grounded in the literature of our field to do our best work. But we can never be fully grounded in it. We live in an information-rich environment with unprecedented access to ideas and evidence. There will always be more scholars to discover, more articles to read, more studies to cite. Beyond this, in our increasingly interdisciplinary era, there will always be different keywords to try, unfamiliar methods to consider, and new knowledge areas to master.

But the “snare of preparation” has been around a lot longer than Google Scholar and interdisciplinarity. One reason we get trapped in reviewing the literature, rather than writing, is that we want to be sure we are truly expert in our corner of our field. We want to really know what we’re doing. We don’t want to be—or be perceived as—bad scholars. This is a version of the impostor syndrome, a version that we need to acknowledge and befriend rather than try to suppress. Our fear of being unmasked as inadequate underlies our felt need to include every possible source.

It feels easier and safer to be “researching” rather than doing the hard and sometimes scary work of writing. Background research keeps us from feeling anxious, but when it goes on too long it is a form of stalling. So how can we know when we are ready to turn from hunting and gathering to actually making our own contribution to the field? What are the differences between being well-grounded in the literature and being stuck in the snare of preparation?

My experience has been that every literature review eventually becomes repetitive, even predictable. I know it’s time for me to switch from gathering to writing when the sources fall into familiar patterns.

I start out feeling overwhelmed by all the books and articles and ideas and authors I’ve never read or even heard of. But because I enjoy the quest itself—the seeking and finding of books and articles, the process of discovering how an area of inquiry develops and coalesces and comes apart—I happily download articles, browse shelves, and order books from the library. At first their bibliographies offer me lots more sources to find, but toward the end of the process they offer me recurring familiar landmarks.

The hunting and gathering helps me recognize Big Names and Major Concepts, Intractable Schisms and Ongoing Debates. But even-

tually the thrill of the hunt settles into a less exhilarating more-of-the-same. Then it is time to reread, closely and carefully, and choose which sources I really want to draw on and therefore cite.

When this happens, you are ready to create a draft of a literature review. This is preliminary, a way to organize content in order to run it by trusted mentors who really know your field. If you are stuck in search-and-collate mode, stop searching. Become willing instead to put together a description of what you have already gathered. Show it to a few colleagues to see if you are on the right track. Are there obvious absences? Who haven’t you read? What else needs to be included? Are you conversant enough with the main aspects of this particular corner of the field?

This draft literature review allows you to organize and bracket the gathering phase. It leaves room for more sources that may come to your attention. Colleagues will have suggestions before you submit, and a good review process should give you even more options to evaluate and incorporate before final publication.

Good scholarship is open ended—an ongoing conversation. Your goal is to become part of the conversation in your corner of the field. So rather than fearing that you are missing something as you try to review “all” of the literature, gather enough to let others help you find additional pertinent information, and move ahead with your project.

Knowing we can and will find more is key to letting go of the One More Source myth. To be productive in academic life, we need to accept that we can never become completely conversant with all relevant literature before we publish. It is just not possible. Instead, we need to become conversant enough to interact productively with others in our area through presenting, writing, and publishing.

Our job isn’t to become impervious to critique but to participate effectively in the scholarly conversation. This requires actually understanding and mastering carefully selected sources rather than piling up an impressive list of references. There is one certain way to look like a bad scholar in your literature review—not by missing a source but by misunderstanding a source. Be selective, and understand all the relevant sources you choose to cite.

Early on in my academic career I wrote an essay with a misleading title. It explored why social critics wrongly (I believed) presumed that

fans were needy and unstable and pathetic. I titled it “The Pathology of Fandom: The Consequences of Characterization.” I was arguing that fandom is normal, not pathological. But a distressing number of speed-readers cite the essay to support the very argument I critique. This means they look like bad scholars to me, and to anyone who has read and understood my work. Wanting to include all possible fan studies citations, they just threw mine in, without (apparently) even glancing over it, to be sure they had everything covered.

So watch out for the temptation to cite every possible source. Be sure you truly understand the articles and evidence you are choosing to use, and gather enough to do a first draft of your review. This gives you something to show others and increases the likelihood that you will see familiar patterns—which means you really are ready to start writing.

If you have been “getting ready to write” for months or years and doing a preliminary literature review feels impossible, maybe your fear of missing an important source is really about something else. Perhaps it is a cover for other myth-fueled fears—like being excoriated by hostile readers, exposed as an impostor, or failing to write a magnum opus. If this is the case, then no amount of citation gathering will help you start writing. Put the literature review aside and address your actual fears.

The idea that there is one more source out there—crucial to the ultimate success of your project—can delude you into thinking that you are being productive when actually you are just ensnared in preparation. Give up the dream of complete expertise and replace it with a commitment to becoming conversant with what you need to know to write this particular piece right now. Incorporate the truly relevant sources into a draft literature review, and get on with your writing.

## Part Four

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### MAINTAINING MOMENTUM

It would be wonderful if by using the three taming techniques, securing our time, space, and energy, and working skillfully with our most troubling writing myths, we could write easily forevermore. Alas, this is one more myth—that writing momentum, once achieved, never leaves us.

The truth is that we can chug along cheerfully for weeks and then suddenly (or gradually) begin to falter. We realize that we haven’t written for days, or that what we’re working on isn’t going anywhere. We feel disconnected from our project or lost in a thicket of options. We get feedback that disheartens us; we get revision requests that stop us cold. If we don’t address these circumstances skillfully, we find ourselves not just in a lull but stalled, perhaps permanently. We forget our writing tools and succumb yet again to our writing myths. We start telling ourselves stories that stand in the way of writing progress.

In this section we explore ways to maintain writing momentum by working effectively with our naturally fluctuating focus, motivation, and commitment. We accept that sometimes writing ebbs, then flows, feels easy and then hard, grinds to a halt and then suddenly gushes out. There are ways to work with these variations to make sure that we don’t get stuck and discouraged.

Not all ebbs are stalls. If you find yourself losing momentum, the first thing to do is go back to basics. Are you still using the three taming techniques? Are you still securing your time, space, and energy? What is showing up in your ventilation file? Which writing myths are you “taking for granite” once again?