

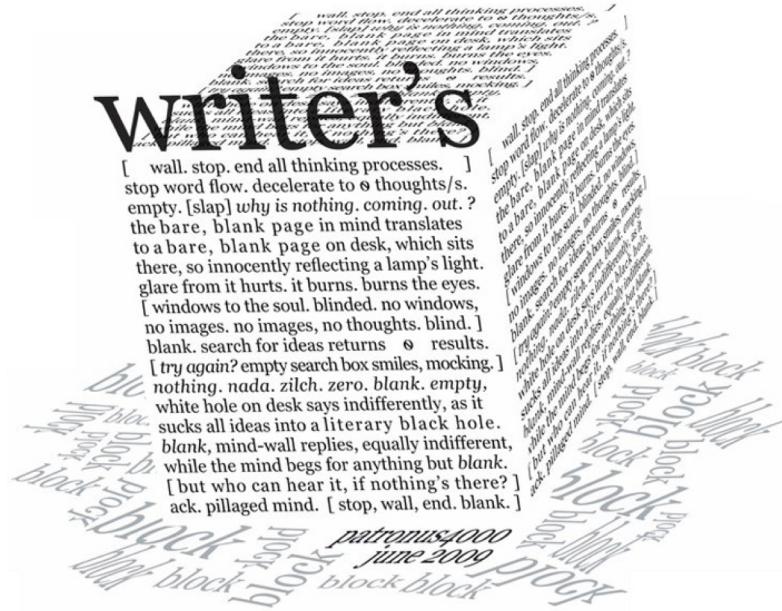
# RCS

RESEARCH  
COMMUNICATION  
SCOTLAND

# Beating Writer's Block

## writer's

[ wall. stop. end all thinking processes. ]  
stop word flow. decelerate to 0 thoughts/s.  
empty. [slap] why is nothing. coming. out. ?  
the bare, blank page in mind translates  
to a bare, blank page on desk, which sits  
there, so innocently reflecting a lamp's light,  
glare from it hurts. it burns. burns the eyes.  
[ windows to the soul. blinded. no windows,  
no images. no images, no thoughts. blind. ]  
blank. search for ideas returns 0 results.  
[ try again? empty search box smiles, mocking. ]  
nothing. nada. zilch. zero. blank. empty.  
white hole on desk says indifferently, as it  
sucks all ideas into a literary black hole.  
blank, mind-wall replies, equally indifferent,  
while the mind begs for anything but blank.  
[ but who can hear it, if nothing's there? ]  
ack. pillaged mind. [ stop, wall, end. blank. ]



Mimo Caenepeel  
Research Communication Scotland

# Workshop overview

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- 1. Getting stuck.** What, how, why – and is it me?
- 2. Choices.** Why can't I just write well? Is it better to write badly, or not at all?
- 3. Strategies.** Ventilation file, good enough for now, pomodoros, scheduling

## **1. Getting stuck. What, why, how – and is it me?**

# What is it like?

What happens

- to your body?
- to your mind?
- to your spirit/emotions?
- to your work/output?

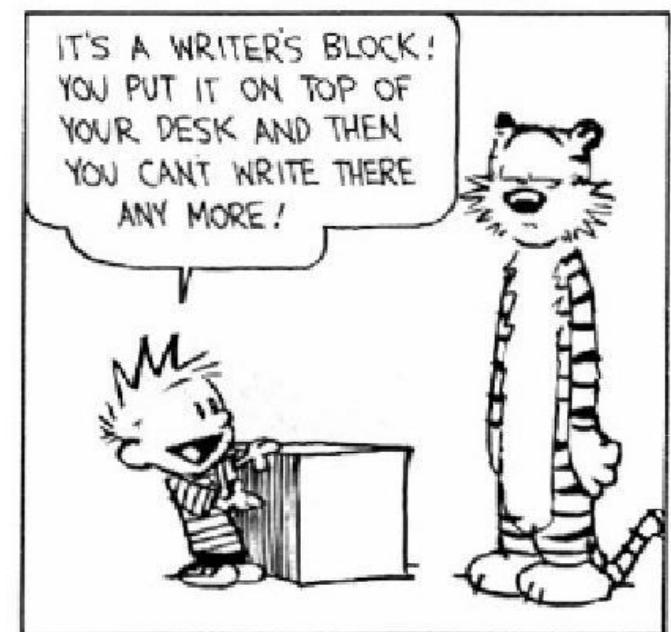
Give detail!



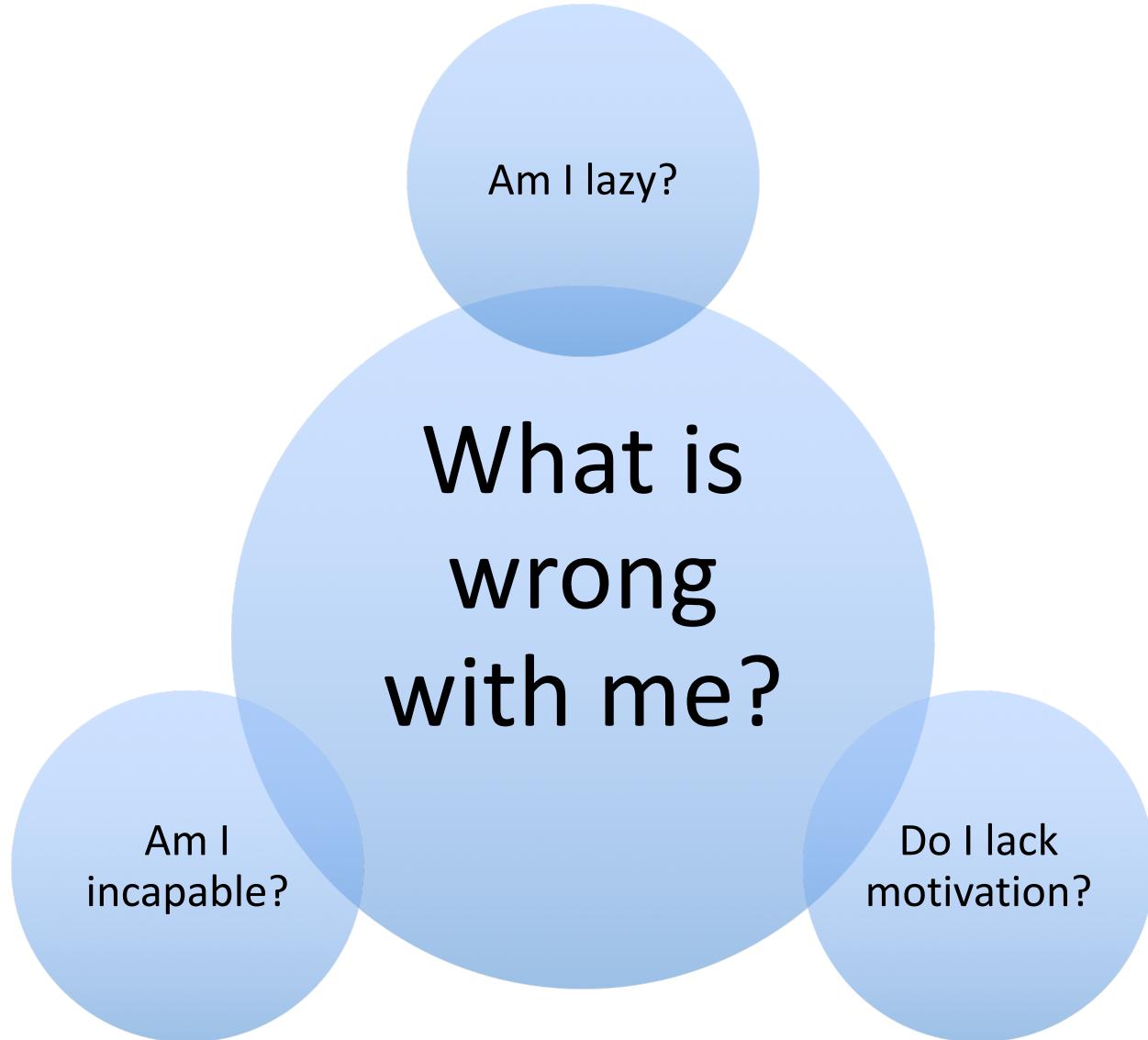
# What is it like?

Capture without words

Summarise in one word



# Is it me?



... blocked PhD writers are typically **hard-working**, **capable** and **motivated** researchers with high standards

# What we know

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Writer's block is **not a psychological disorder** that is due to a particular personality type

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Ebb and flow (retreating and advancing) are part of **all creative processes** (and different from getting stuck)

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Writing blocks occur most frequently at the **composition/drafting** stage

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Writing blocks **rarely** affect **all writing**

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**Experienced writers** are more likely to encounter writer's block than inexperienced ones

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Writing blocks typically occur in **transitions**

# The PhD transition

The PhD transition is dramatic but poorly defined

- What does the work entail?
- How should it progress?
- How much should you read?
- How much should you write?

What is new about doing a PhD?



JORGE CHAM ©THE STANFORD DAILY

phd.stanford.edu/comics

# Writing, stopping, getting stuck

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When do you get stuck?

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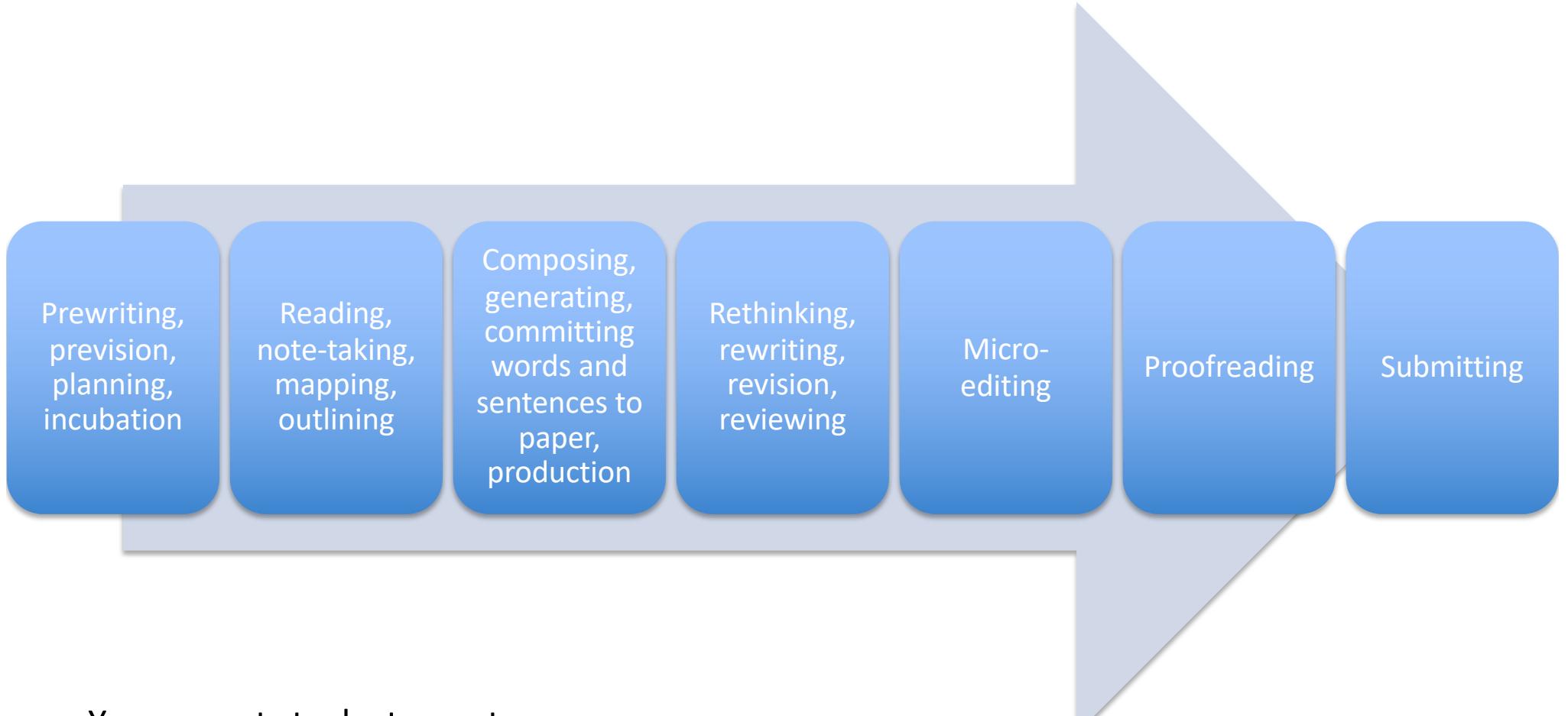
What stops you?

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What do you do next, instead?



# When?



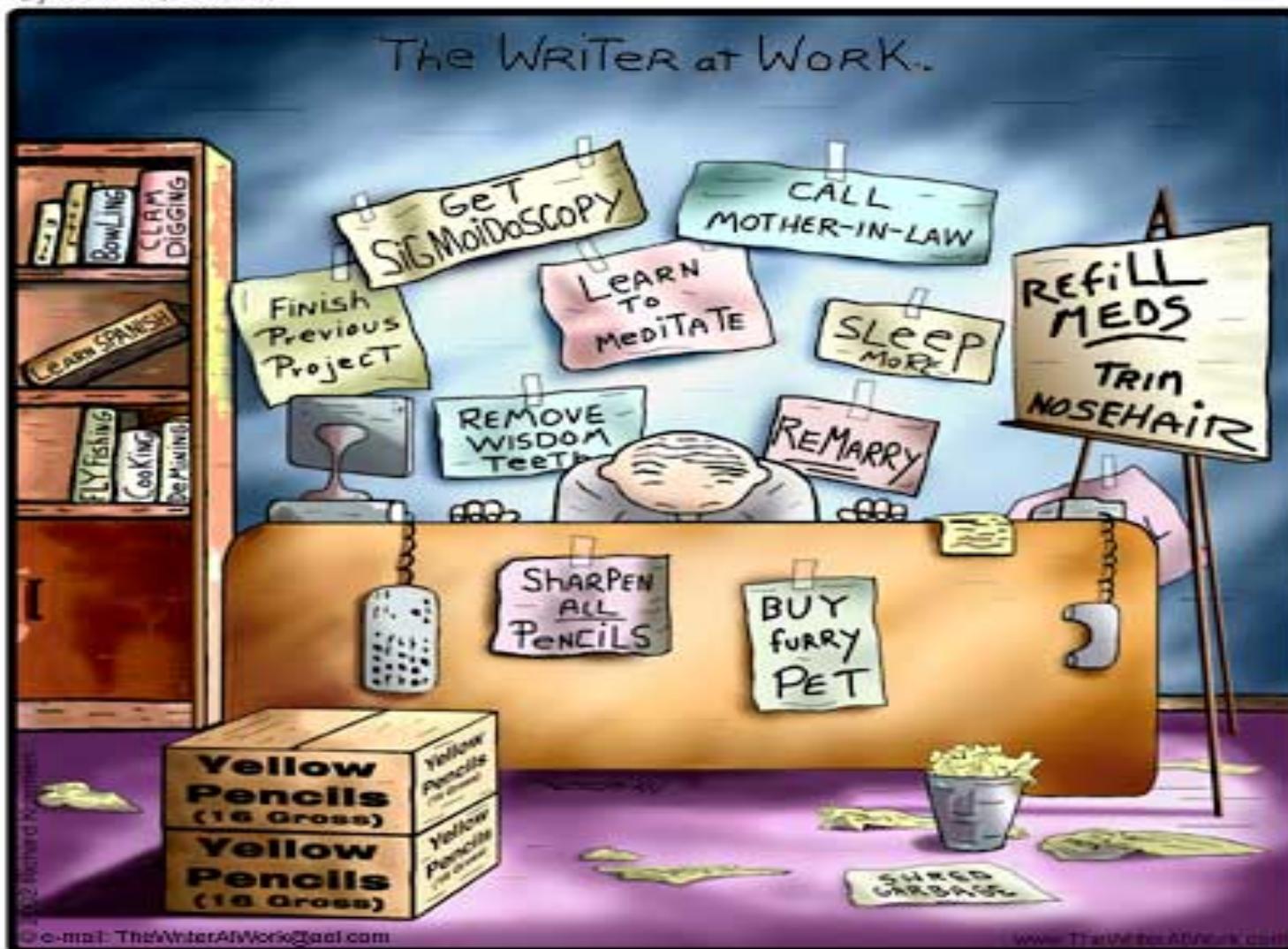
# Why?

Not  
good  
enough.

amplified

# What do you do instead? Anti-tasks

By Richard Krzemien



Pressing tasks to be completed before beginning a new project.

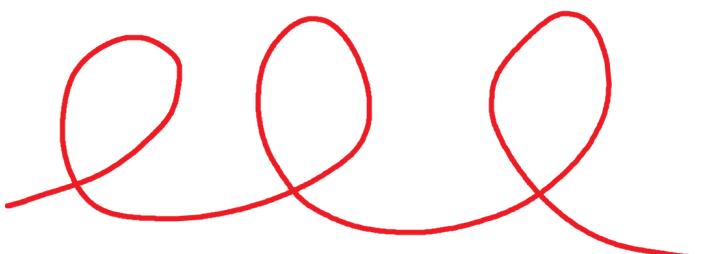
# What do you do instead? Looping back

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Writing involves forward movement and returning

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A repeated or habitual return can get you stuck



# Habitual looping back

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**At the drafting stage:** a repeated returning to reading, research and note-taking

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**At the revision stage:** a repeated return to reading or early drafting

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**At the proofreading/submission stage:** a repeated return to reading, early drafting or editing

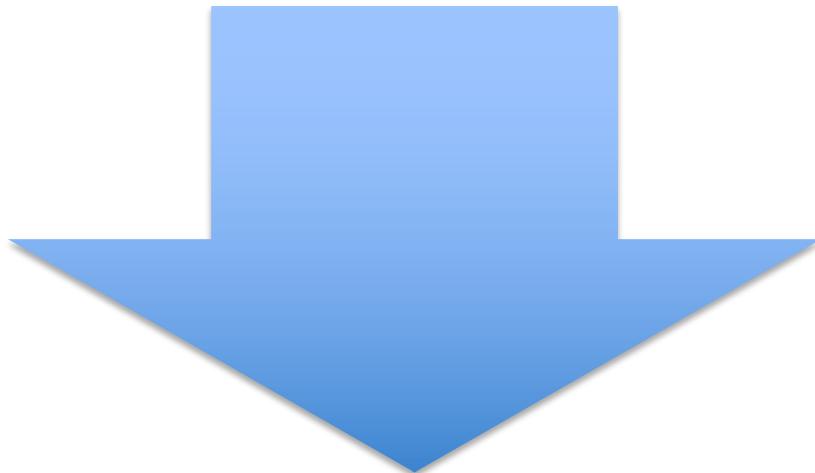
# First definition of writer's block



‘... an extreme difficulty with writing that interferes with forward movement through the writing process ... experienced as an almost physical obstacle’

(Keith Hjortshoj:  
*Understanding Writing Blocks*)

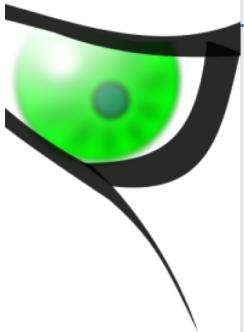
# Second definition of writer's block



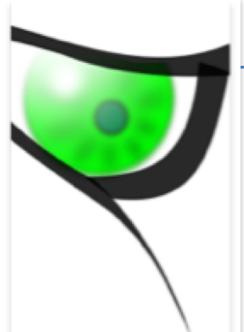
'... some kind of disproportion between your standards and your performance' (William Stafford: *Writing the Australian Crawl*)



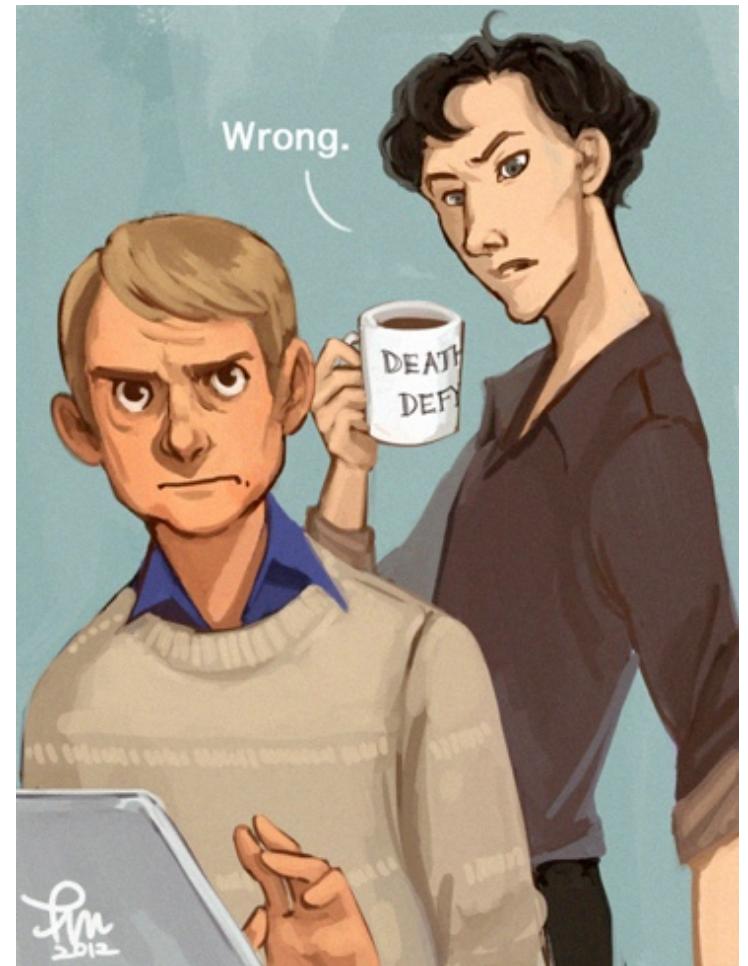
# Standards and assumptions



What are your writing standards (as an academic)?



What have you been told about your writing?



What is the alternative?

"If I waited  
for perfection,  
I would never  
write a word."

(Margaret Atwood)

**2. Choices. Why can't I just write well? Writing badly – or not at all?**

# Choices

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Embark on an anti-task (step sideways)

---

Switch to a more comfortable writing task (loop backwards)

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Write ‘badly’ (move forward)



# Frustration and longing

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‘Manure’ writing and  
‘fragrant’ writing

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Blocked writers often  
long for fragrant writing

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Manure writing often  
leads to fragrant writing



# Tolerating ‘bad’ (uncomfortable, unsatisfactory) writing

‘Impatience is the single most important predictor of writing blocks’  
(Boice 1994)





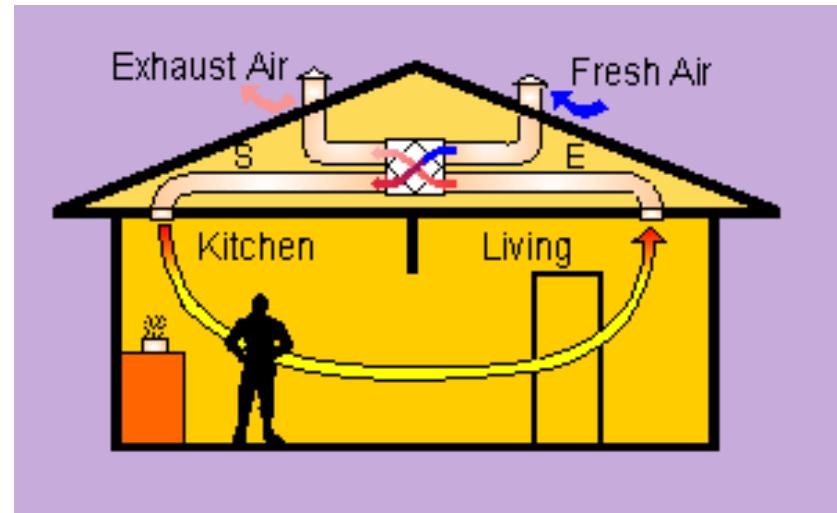
## No huskies

'Very few writers really know what they are doing until they've done it. Nor do they go about their business feeling dewy and thrilled. They do not type a few stiff warm-up sentences and then find themselves bounding along like huskies across the snow. [...] We all often feel like we are pulling teeth, even those writers whose prose ends up being the most natural and fluid.'

**Anne Lamott: Bird by Bird.**

### **3. Strategies: ventilation file, ‘good enough for now’, pomodoros, scheduling**

# Create a ventilation file

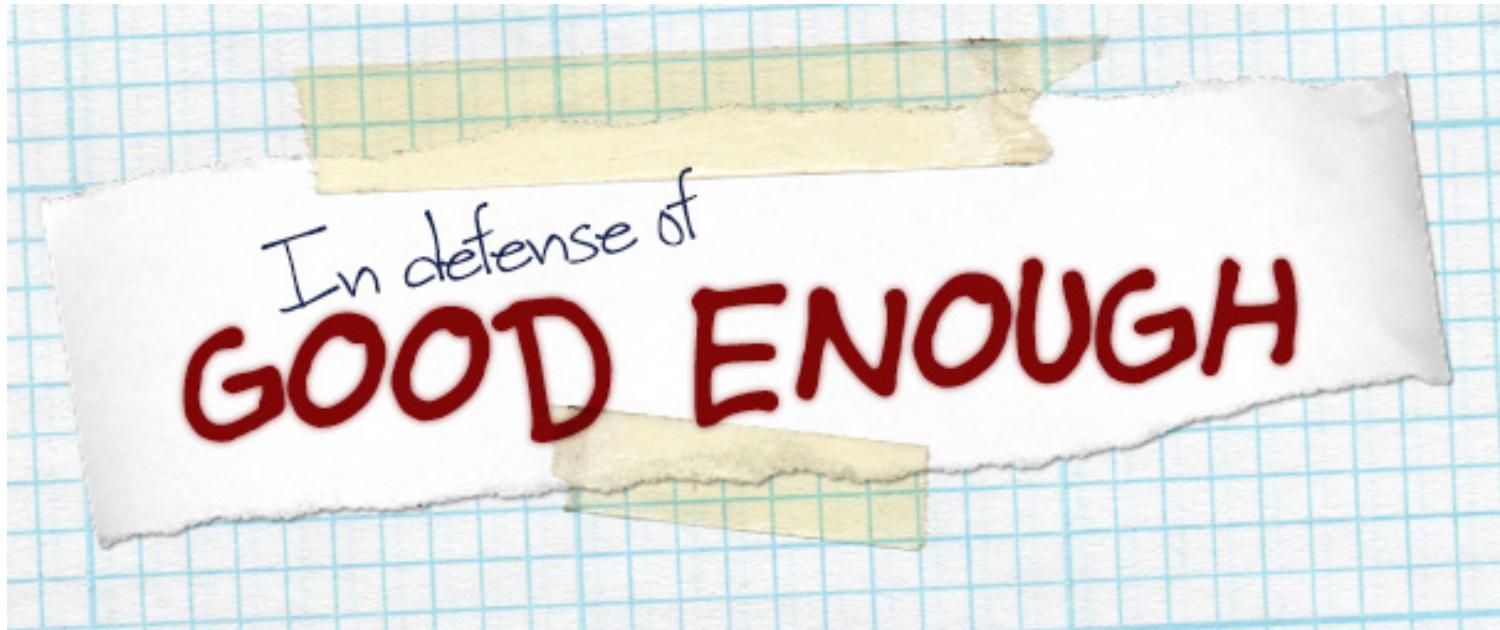


Write down every negative, angry, frustrated and self-sabotaging thought you have about writing

You can comment on a particular piece of writing: why is it dull, useless, bad, pointless, scary, open to ridicule

Other files suggested by David Sternberg: timetable, meeting with supervisors, contacts and arrangements for fieldwork, troubleshooting, inspiration, ideas and thoughts, devil's advocate, self-assessment, dissertation support group, master review of progress

# ‘Good enough (for now)’



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What is ‘good enough’ at the drafting stage?

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What is ‘good enough’ for early revision?

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What is ‘good enough’ during advanced editing

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What is ‘good enough’ at the proofreading stage?

# Drafting and satisficing

- I am trying to say...*
- What I really mean is ...*
- Set a timer
- Make it a habit



# But the words are wrong!

‘We need the more hopeful attitude that we get from understanding how the process works: “Of course the words are wrong. That’s how it goes with words.’

**Peter Elbow**



# Thoughts manifest imperfectly

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Freewrite and satisfice

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Speech-to-text technology (e.g. Dragon)

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Pen-to-print technology (e.g. Moleskin with Eclipse pen)



# Early (high-level) revision

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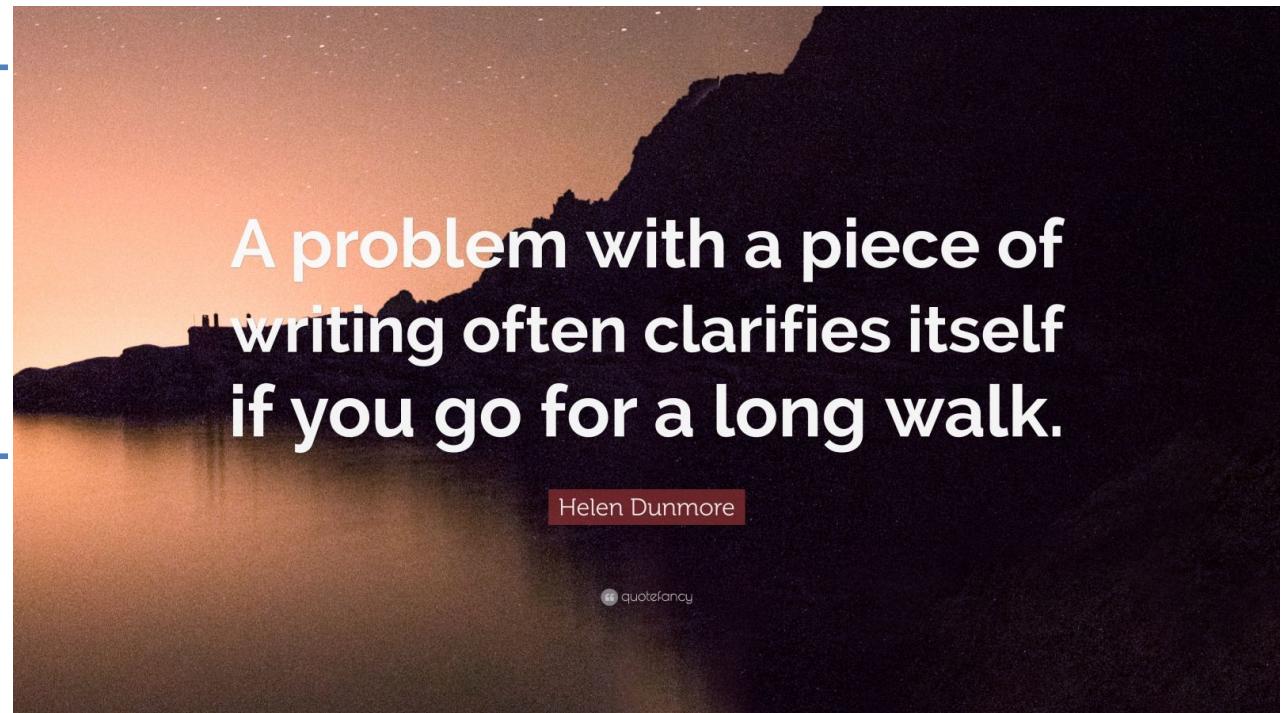
Cut up your text

---

Sketchnote your  
text

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Get software  
support  
(Scrivener)

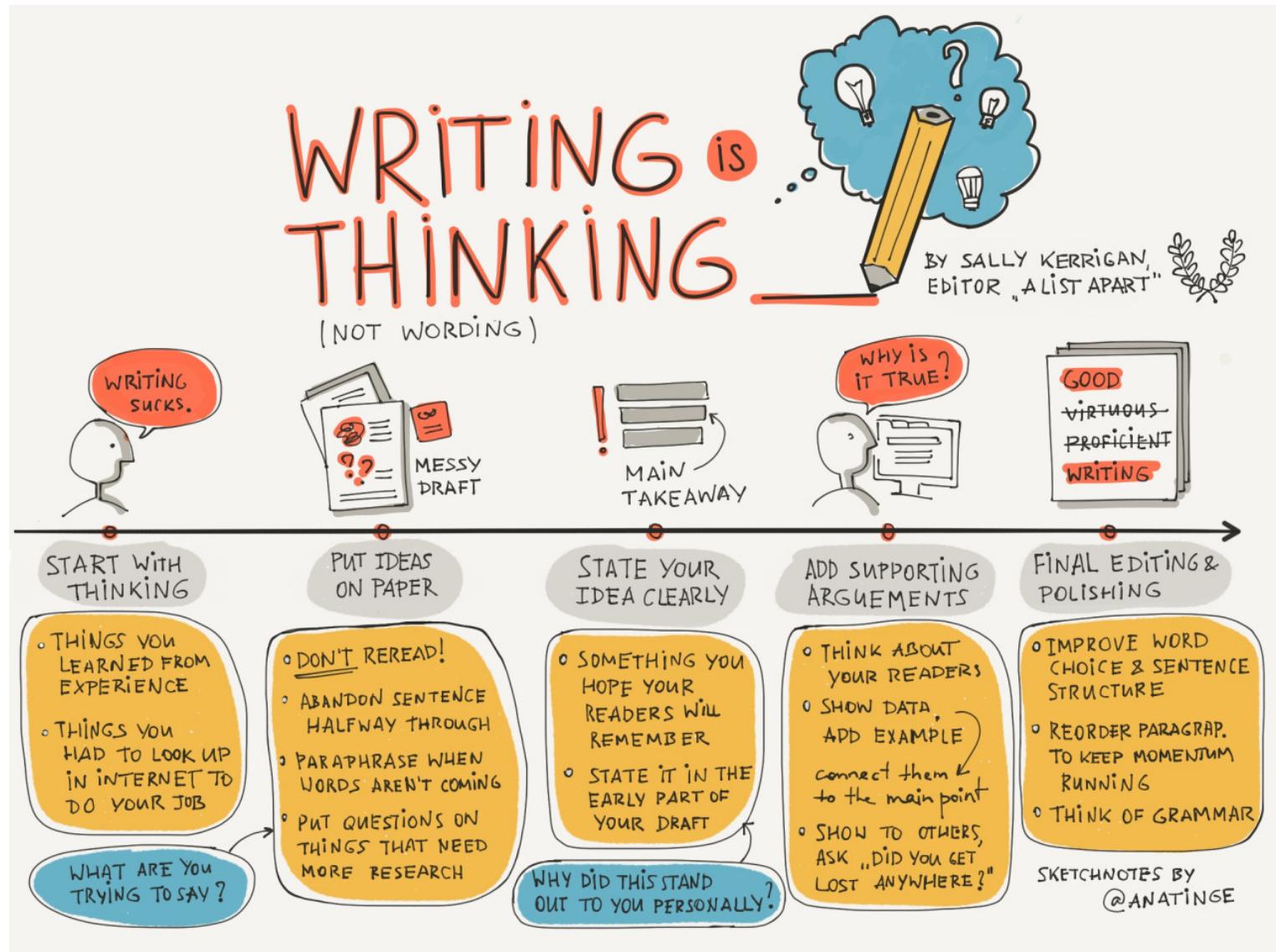


# Cut up your text



... along section and paragraph boundaries  
Try out possibilities  
Let someone else experiment with it

# Sketchnoting



# Scrivener (literatureandlatte.com)

The screenshot shows the Scrivener software interface with the following details:

- Top Bar:** 'Origin of Species' (back), 'Manuscript' (title), 'Edit' (button), and various document status icons.
- Word Count:** 237 words.
- Right Panel Content:**
  - Variation Under Domestication:**

When we look to the individuals of the same variety or sub-variety of our older cultivated plants and animals, one of the first points which strikes us, is, that they generally differ more from each other than do the individuals of any one species or variety in a state of nature. When we reflect on the vast diversity of the plants and animals which have been cultivated, and which have varied during all ages under the most different climates and treatment, I think we are driven to conclude that this great variability is simply due to our domestic productions having been raised under conditions of life not so uniform as, and somewhat different from, those to which the parent-species have been exposed under nature.

There is also, I think, some probability in the view propounded by Andrew Knight, that this variability may be partly connected with excess of food. It seems pretty clear that organic beings must be exposed during several generations to the new conditions of life to cause any appreciable amount of variation; and that when the organisation has once begun to vary, it generally continues to vary for many generations. No case is on record of a variable being ceasing to be variable under cultivation. Our oldest cultivated plants, such as wheat, still often yield new varieties: our oldest domesticated animals are still capable of rapid improvement or modification.
- Left Panel (Table of Contents):**
  - Introduction:** When on board H.M.S. 'Beagle,' as naturalist, I was much struck with certain facts in the distribution of the inhabitants of South America, and in the geological relations of the present to the past inhabitants of that continent....
  - Variation Under Domestication (First Draft):** Causes of Variability—Effects of Habit—Correlation of Growth—Inheritance—Character of Domestic Varieties—Difficulty of distinguishing between Varieties and Species.
  - Origin of Domestic Varieties:** from one or more Species—Domestic Pigeons, their Differences and Origin—Principle of Selection anciently followed, its Effects.
  - Methodical and Unconscious Selection:** Unknown Origin of our Domestic Productions—Circumstances favourable to Man's power of Selection.
  - Variation Under Nature:**
  - Struggle for Existence:**
  - Natural Selection:**
  - Laws of Variation:**
    - Effects of external conditions—Use and disuse, combined with natural selection; organs of flight and of vision—Acclimatisation—Correlation of growth—Compensation and economy of growth.
    - False correlations—Multiple, rudimentary, and lowly organised structures variable—Parts developed in an unusual manner are highly variable: specific characters more variable than generic: secondary sexual characters variable.
    - Species of the same genus vary in an analogous manner—Reversions to long-lost characters—Summary.
  - Difficulties on Theory:**
    - Difficulties on the theory of descent with modification—Transitions—Absence or rarity of transitional varieties—Transitions in habits of life.
    - Diversified habits in the same species—Species with habits widely different from those of their allies—Organs of extreme perfection—Means of transition—Cases of difficulty—Natura non facit saltum.

# Micro-editing

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Listen to your  
writing

---

Let your draft  
cool



# Proofreading



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Get software support  
(WhiteSmoke, Grammarly)

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Print your text and  
proofread by hand

---

Focus on correctness and  
consistency **only**

---

Get someone else to  
proofread your text



# Pomodoros

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What is the optimum time span during which you can focus (without distraction) on a single writing task?

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How do you define a ‘manageable writing task’?



The Pomodoro technique

# Not manageable

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Move straight from notes  
to an accomplished draft

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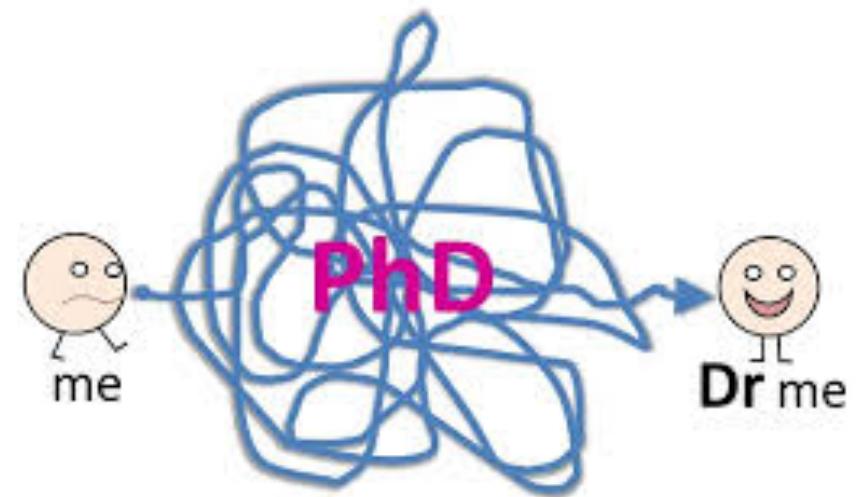
Draft a chapter in a day

---

Compose and finish an  
article in a week

---

Write up a PhD in three  
months



# Manageable tasks

---

Making an outline of a chapter

---

Drafting a subsection of a chapter

---

Sketching key results

---

Outlining the questions a chapter addresses

---

Revising a section of a chapter

---

Incorporating feedback on a draft chapter

---

Drawing up graphics/tables for a draft chapter

---

Inserting references into a section

How  
long  
would  
each of  
these  
take?

# Schedule writing time

Protect ruthlessly

4

IAD STAFF - This is what I

09:00 Writing time

5

IAD WP HSS?

09:00 Writing time

# Allotting and protecting



Emergency  
writing



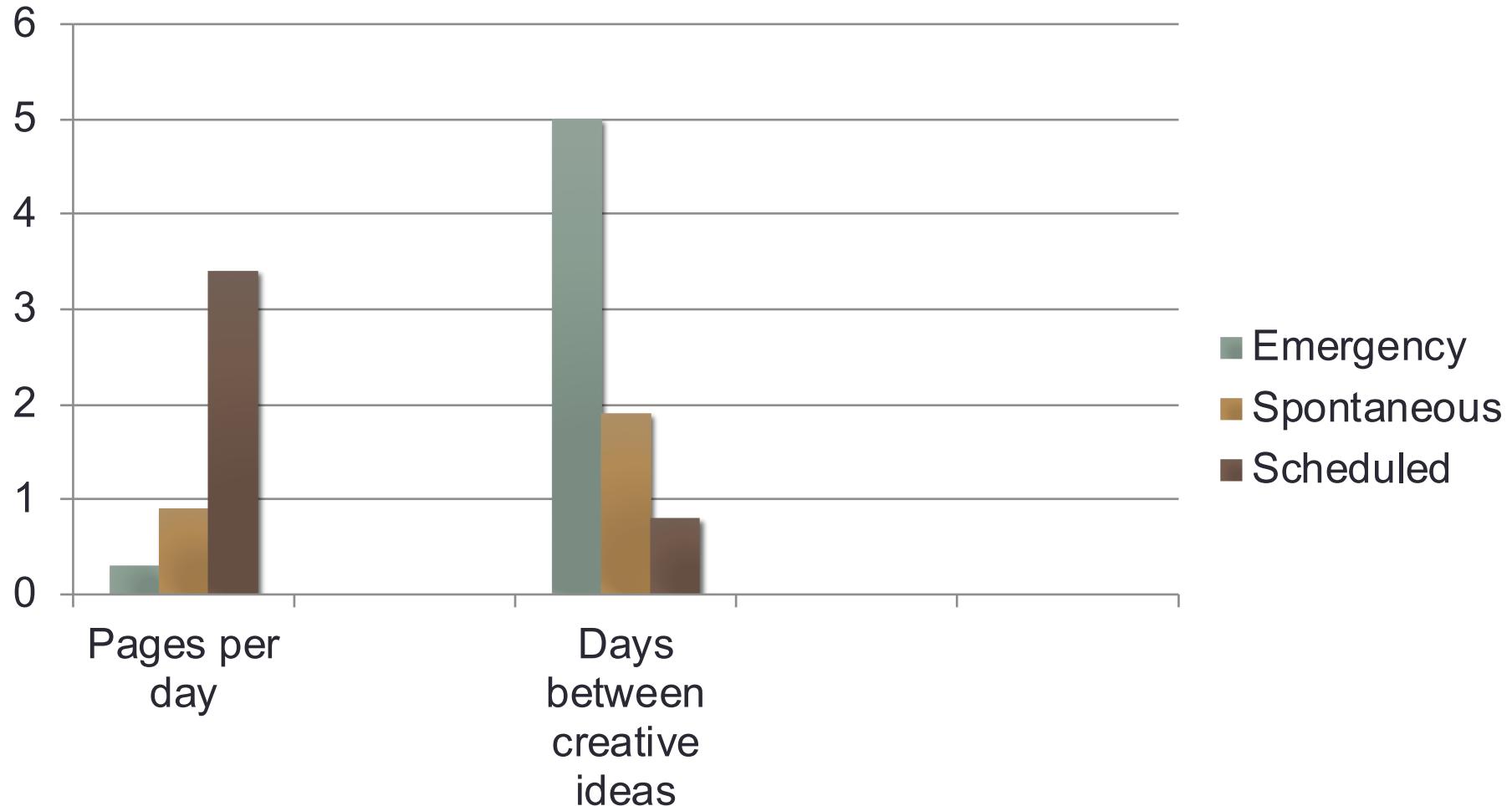
Spontaneous  
writing



Scheduled  
writing

Robert Boice: Professors as writers.

# Boice's findings



# Scheduling support

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## IAD writing retreats

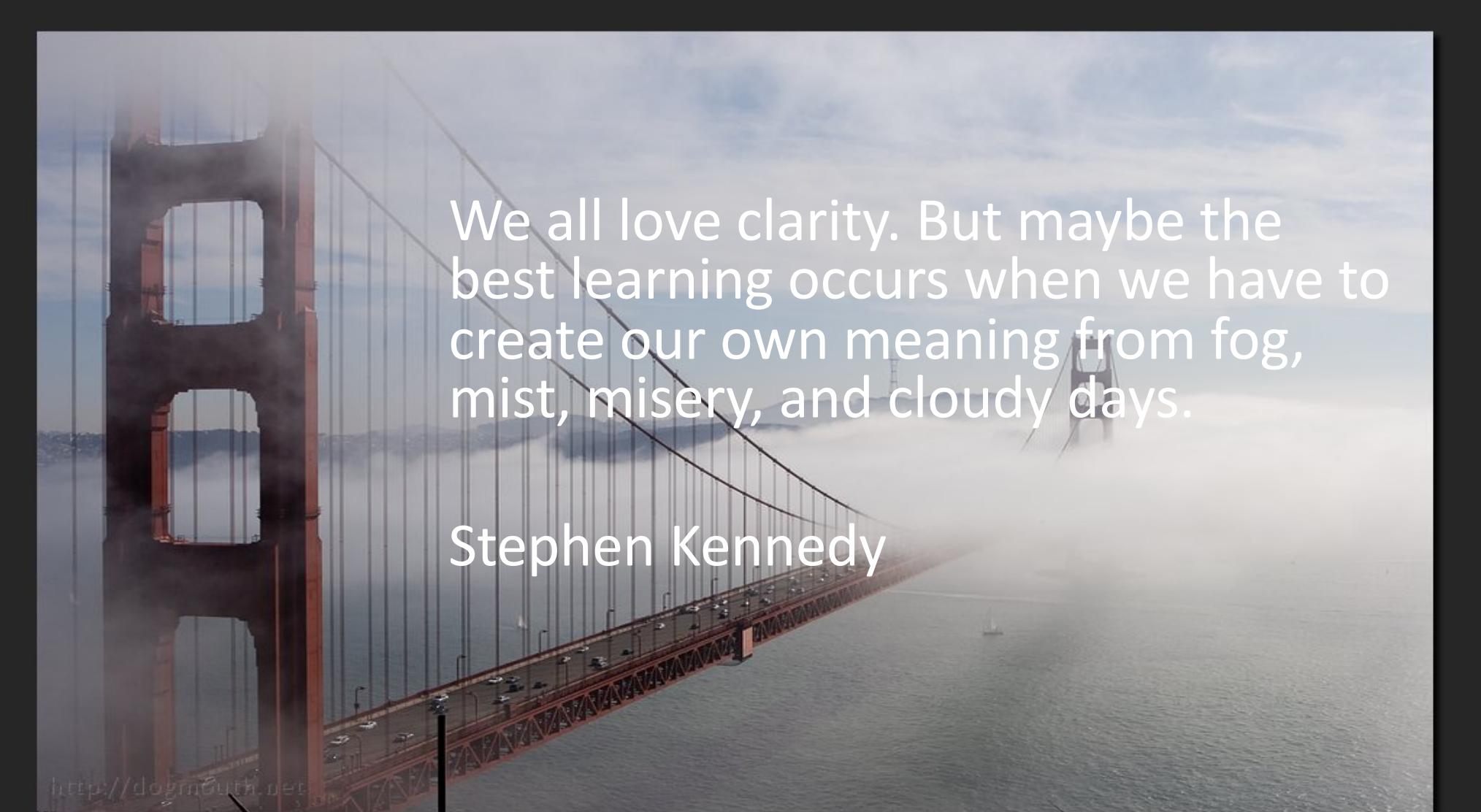
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## IAD ‘Just write’ sessions

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[focusmate.com](http://focusmate.com)

# The last word



We all love clarity. But maybe the best learning occurs when we have to create our own meaning from fog, mist, misery, and cloudy days.

Stephen Kennedy