On Academic Writing

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Abstract: This essay examines the literature related to the craft of academic writing, with a particular focus on four academic writing how-to books. Three of the books present prescriptive plans for becoming a productive academic writer, while the fourth is based on a qualitative study of 100 successful academic writers. The article examines the advice within these texts, comparing and contrasting the recommendations of each, and then discusses the applicability of the works to the profession of librarianship.

The irony of my writing on the topic of writing is not lost on me, as I have spent much of my career as a librarian expressing my loathing for the act, nor have I been a particularly productive writer. Negativity, anxiety, or apprehension about writing can hinder the completion of a project – or sabotage it from the start. However, when I began to look into how to change my attitude (and, I hoped, my productivity), I discovered a body of work that intrigued me to the point of wanting to write about it.

There are a number of how-to books on the topic of academic writing written specifically for faculty. These include Robert Boice's *Professors as Writers: A Self-help Guide to Productive Writing* (1990), Paul Sylvia's *How to Write a Lot* (2007), Joli Jensen's *Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics* (2017) and Helen Sword's *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write* (2017). There are also titles with writing advice for particular scenarios or goals, such as Eviatar Zerubavel's *The Clockwork Muse: A Practical Guide to Writing Theses, Dissertations, and Books* (1999), and Wendy Belcher's *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success* (2009). Titles for a specific audience also exist, such as *Writing and Publishing: The Librarian's Handbook* (2010) edited by Carol Smallwood, along with titles aimed at graduate students.

What, then, is the secret to academic writing – or is there one? To explore this question, I focused my attention mainly on the works by Boice, Sylvia, Jensen, and Sword. The first three works, examined first, present plans for becoming a productive academic writer, whereas Sword's book, discussed later, is more an examination of successful academic writers rather than a how-to manual. Despite this, however, she does come to conclusions about shared characteristics among her subjects. At the end, I discuss how these texts may be applicable to academic librarians.

Boice's *Professors as Writers* is perhaps the foundational text in the genre of academic writing self-help. His expertise extends beyond self-help, as he conducted numerous psychological studies of academics and their writing habits, particularly focusing on the writing plan he developed into

workshops, and he interweaves this research within the description of his writing plan. Silvia, another

psychologist, takes a no-nonsense approach in *How to Write a Lot*, writing, "We won't talk about

unleashing your inner anything" (Silvia, 2007, p. 3). In contrast, Jensen, a media studies scholar and the

director of the TU Faculty Writing Program at the University of Tulsa, takes a gentler tone in *Write No

Matter What*.

All three, however, take a prescriptivist approach and advocate for their particular methods.

Boice presents a four-step plan, consisting of automaticity, externality, self-control, and sociality

(Boice, 1990, p. 96). Automaticity is writing as routine, which develops via methods such as

spontaneous and generative writing that release the inner writer. This stage establishes momentum

(Boice, 1990, p. 96). Externality refers to external controls that ensure writing (Boice, 1990, p. 96). Self-

control comes from within and includes self-talk, or internal scripts or dialog in the mind; thought-

stopping, or identifying and quashing negative self-talk; thought-substitution, or replacing negative

inner dialogue with more positive scripts; and self-reward (Boice, 1990, pp. 97-103). Sociality refers to

the social nature of writing – seeking feedback, preparing for criticism, building social networks, and

developing a sense of audience (Boice, 1990, pp. 103-106).

Sylvia states his message as five actions: making a schedule, setting clear goals, keeping track

of your work, rewarding yourself, and building good habits (Silvia, 2007, p. 3). Jensen's view is that the

keys to productive writing are a craftsman attitude, which emphasizes the growth of a set of skills with

practice, and frequent, low-stress contact with an enjoyable project. Her plan can be thought of as an

equation: successful writing = "project box" + "ventilation file" + 15 minutes a day (Jensen, 2017, pp. 17-

20). The project box is an organized set of files that breaks the project into smaller sections and allows

key elements to be collected and organized. This can be a physical file box or done electronically. The

purpose is to have a way to open and close the project, keeping it organized but separate from other

work. The ventilation file is a separate space for chronicling negative, hostile, and resentful feeling

arising when writing. Its purpose is to acknowledge and incorporate this resistance into the project

itself. It serves as a safe space to express doubts and fears and engage obstacles (Jensen, 2017, p. 17).

The first question is what counts as writing. For Boice, this is simply putting words on pages,

regardless of whether they're intended for publication or not. He advocates prewriting steps of

spontaneous and generative writing (automaticity) (Boice, 1990, p. 67; p. 96). Silvia identifies any sort

of activity that moves the project forward as writing – including research, data analysis, reading or

note-taking (Silvia, 2007, p. 18). Jensen (2017) never explicitly defines writing but from the context of

the book it can be inferred as either work on a manuscript or writing within the ventilation file.

On barriers to writing

Boice, Sylvia, and Jensen each discuss various issues, either emotional or behavioral, that

stand in the way of writing. While in most of this essay I discuss the works in chronological order,

Jensen devotes the most time to these issues and frames them in a particularly clear manner, making

her work the best place to start this section. She focuses a significant portion of her book to what she

labels as "demons" and "myths." She identifies seven myths: magnum opus; hostile reader; imposter;

compared-with-X; cleared-deck dream; perfect first sentence; and need for one more source (Jensen,

2017, p. 43). Jensen labels the magnum opus myth – the belief that we must create a great work – the

most common and damaging myth, arguing that writers should counter it by committing to making

the best scholarly contribution they can under their current and particular circumstances (Jensen,

2017, p. 47; p. 49). Boice references a similar fear in his discussion of procrastination, noting that it can

be blamed on definitions of success in terms of impossibly high standards (Boice, 1990, p. 10). Jensen's

imposter myth is widely known as imposter syndrome – the feeling that up until now we've fooled

everyone about our abilities and that the current writing project will be what blows our cover. This

syndrome persists even after tenure (Jensen, 2017, p. 52). Boice also makes mention of the role of fear

of failure as a cause of writing problems (Boice, 1990, p. 9).

The "cleared-deck fantasy" is the myth that writing cannot begin until all other obligations

have been dealt with (Jensen, 2017, p. 56). However, as we all know, the deck is never totally clear.

Jensen says to dissolve this myth by facing this fact (Jensen, 2017, p. 59). Giving it up, she argues, frees

us up to figure out how to secure time now. What Jensen calls the "hostile reader," Boice refers to as

the "internal censor" (Jensen, 2017, p. 60; Boice, 1990, p. 8). While academic writing will (and should)

be scrutinized by the review process, this myth gets writers stuck, unable to write until ideas seem

perfect (Boice, 1990, p. 8). Jensen notes that the opposite of the hostile reader fear is the euphoric

reader hope – that a submission be met with only praise – and advises writers to find the middle

ground (Jensen, 2017, p. 61). Jensen's "compared-with-X" myth gets writers stuck constantly

comparing themselves to others, which is counterproductive and potentially paralyzing. (Jensen, 2017,

p. 64) What Jensen dubs the "perfect first sentence" myth also fits the mold of perfectionism, also

noted by Boice (Jensen, 2017, p. 67; Boice, 1990, p. 10).

Jensen's "one more source" myth overlaps with Silvia's "I need to read a few more articles"

behavioral barrier (Jensen, 2017, p. 71; Silvia, 2007, p. 18). Jensen advocates beginning writing as soon

as the literature review becomes repetitive and predictable, accepting that we will never truly be able

to cite absolutely every source, whereas Silvia is more pragmatic in his solution: do whatever you need

to do to move your project forward during your writing time (Jensen, 2017, pp. 72-74; Silvia, 2007, p.

18).

Boice mentions a few additional emotional issues that can stand in the way of writing: early

experience, such as a bad experience with a teacher; mental health; and personality type (Boice, 1990,

pp. 11-12). He also lists two behavioral issues: working habits and attitudes and working habits and

busyness (Boice, 1990, p. 13). Silvia's barriers to writing are almost entirely behavioral, related to time,

space, and motivation (Silvia, 2007, pp. 11 – 26).

On time and schedules

Boice, Sylvia, and Jensen all mention the commonly held belief among struggling writers hat

time must be "made" for writing and instead reframe this as "finding" or "securing time." Boice and

Jensen both advocate tracking how the reader's time is currently being spent, either as a chart (Boice,

1990, p. 79) or in a "reverse day planner," in which the writer tracks how time is actually spent (Jensen,

2017, p. 23). By examining these, the reader identifies time in blocks as short as 30 minutes that can be

reallocated to writing. Silvia is more direct, writing "instead of finding time to write, allot it. Prolific

writers make a schedule and stick to it. It's that simple" and "ruthlessly defend your writing time…

people will not respect your commitment to your writing time" (Silvia, 2007, p. 12; p. 15).

Boice and Jensen are "dailyists," to use Sword's term (Sword, 2017, p.19) – that is, they

prescribe writing daily. Boice advises at least 30 minutes of writing per day, but no more than two

hours (Boice, 1990, p. 87). Jensen advocates writing every day for 15 minutes with two additional

blocks of one to two hours each week (Jensen, 2017, p. 24). Silvia, personally, writes two hours per day,

every weekday, but says that the secret is the regularity of writing, not the number of days or hours

spent writing (Silvia, 2007, p. 13). Silvia and Jensen both mention the role of the schedule in reducing

anxiety (Sylvia, 2007, p. 14; Jensen, 2017, p. 12).

On space

Does a writing space matter? Boice and Jensen both devote time to discussing the workspace.

Boice advocates creating one or more regular spaces for writing, ideally dedicated solely to that

purpose. The space should be comfortable and free of distractions and social interruptions (Boice, 1990, p. 78). Jensen maintains that campus offices are not designed for writing, as they are connected to obligations related to teaching and departmental work, as well as opportunities for distractions from students and colleagues (Jensen, 2017, p. 27). She argues that a regularly used, functional writing space – well organized and containing only what is needed for the project at hand – allows for writing with minimum distraction and maximum ease (Jensen, 2017, p. 30). In contrast, Sylvia holds no stock in the idea of having a space of one's own for writing, arguing that equipment will never aid in writing, only making and sticking to a schedule (Silvia, 2007, p. 20; p. 22).

On motivation

Boice writes extensively about how to ensure regular productivity. He writes that the most familiar rule about writing getting done is that what can be delayed, will be. He advocates using the "priority principle" and contingency management to overcome this impulse, in addition to advocating tracking daily progress. The priority principle is "that which can be delayed, need not be. Decide which recurrent, daily activities you enjoy and make them contingent on doing a valued but delayable task first" (Boice, 1990, p. 78). This small reward could be a shower or a phone call, but for some people a stick is needed - they require themselves to donate to a hated organization if they skip a writing session (Boice, 1990, p. 78). He notes that perfectionists and the impatient, in particular, need a powerful incentive to try a writing plan and recommends a strong form of contingency management (Boice, 1990, p. 91). Silvia references mainly internal motivation such as goal setting and progress tracking, though he does advocate rewarding oneself when reaching a project goal – but never by not writing (Silvia, 2007, pp. 30 – 44).

While Jensen devotes the most time to emotional issues blocking writers, she writes relatively little about external motivation. Motivation, for Jensen, comes from within when working on an

enjoyable project (Jensen, 2017, p. xi). In a chapter entitled "Follow the lilt," she discusses projects and

why writers choose them. She bemoans the fact that often academics (like students) chose project that

don't interest them – a choice that she views as a mistake if the goal is to become happy and

productive writers (Jensen, 2017, p. 78). Silvia, however, makes no reference to the enjoyment of

writing – in fact, he specifically calls it "un-fun" (Silvia, 2007, p. 4).

On the social aspects of writing

The authors recommend a social component to writing. Boice's fourth step is sociality,

consisting of four components: soliciting comments and critique from multiple readers across all

stages, structuring the request for specific feedback in order to get meaningful responses; preparing

for negative criticism by preparing self-talk that defuses criticism and allows for a thoughtful response;

building social networks; and developing a sense of audience (Boice, 1990, pp. 104-106). Boice

recommends looking for collaborative opportunities, particularly when resuming a disrupted project

(Boice, 1990, p. 110). On the contrary, Jensen advises against collaborative work, arguing that it often

results in unenjoyable projects that get bogged down (Jensen, 2017, p. 80).

Jensen includes a chapter on effective feedback, not just how to receive it but also how to give

it to others, stating that by giving informed feedback writers renew their own commitment to the

practice of writing (Jensen, 2017, p. 94). For Jensen, giving and receiving good feedback is part of the

craftsman approach to writing (Jensen, 2017, p. 96). She notes that some writers are particularly good

at offering insight, while others are better at information sharing, and still others are best at mutuality.

The best writers, she says, are able to do all three (Jensen, 2017, p. 95). She also spends time discusses

overcoming the isolation of traditional academic culture, noting that while peers can be competitors,

alliances improve scholarly work because the help of others can identify areas of study, research more effectively, enjoy writing more, and find publication more readily (Jensen, 2017, pp. 131-132).

On writing groups

Both Silvia and Jensen discuss writing groups. Sylvia dubs these "agraphia groups," a tongue-in-cheek reference to the pathologic loss of the ability to write. The purpose of the group is to offer authors a chance to talk about their ongoing projects, get ideas and insights about writing challenges from colleagues, and help the members set goals (Silvia, 2007, p. 51). Group members write down goals at each meeting, and at the start of each meeting members recite these and update the group on whether they were met (Silvia, 2007, p. 52). He lists five components of a successful group: members setting concrete, short-term goals at each meeting and monitoring the progress at all meetings; members sticking to writing goals only, and perhaps beginning the group by reading a book about how to write; members reinforcing good writing habits with small social rewards or intervening when a writer isn't meeting a goal; members being the same population (i.e. faculty or student, but not mixed); and coffee. This fifth component, he admits, is optional (Silvia, 2007, pp. 52-55).

Jensen references two types of writing groups – those focusing on critique and those that offer support for the writing process. Critique or workshop groups focus on content – members read portions of their writing to others for feedback. She cautions against the critique groups, except for creative writers, stating that academics already have plenty of opportunities for content critique from trusted colleagues within their disciplines and the peer-review process itself (Jensen, 2017, p. 137). Jensen believes that what writers need instead is support for the writing process itself. She gives these guidelines: focus on process, not content; stay the right size and on-time (she, like Silva, recommends regular weekly to monthly meetings of about an hour); meet in an academic setting, not a café or home

(in contrast to Silvia's group, held at a coffeeshop); attend whether or not goals have been met; set

realistic goals; write goals in a shared notebook; follow a time-for-everyone structure with everyone

sharing their progress and receiving suggestions; and maintain confidentiality (Jensen, 2017, p. 138).

Both Silvia and Jensen caution against the encroachment of academic gossip and unrelated talk in

meetings (Silvia, 2007, p. 49; Jensen, 2017, p. 139).

Sword discusses additional forms of social writing, including "write on site" and "shut up and

write" groups, as well as writing retreats, and writing networks. In "write on site" groups, participants

meet for a few hours to write silently in the company of others (Sword, 2017, p. 7). Boice references a

similar strategy in his section on the writing environment, though he mentions inviting just one person

(Boice, 1990, p. 78). In "shut up and write" groups, participants may begin with opening conversation

or a round of introductions before undertaking a timed period of quiet writing time. This period may be

referred to as a Pomodoro, from the tomato-shaped timer used by the popularizer of the technique

(Sword, 2017, p. 139). Writing retreats are an extension of the "write on site" method, wherein writers

cloister themselves in an atmosphere of "scholarly sanctuary" (Sword, 2017, p. 139). Sword notes that

successful retreats generally have a few key qualities: they provide a break from routine; they are

institutionally sponsored to at least some degree, so that participants feel their labor is being

recognized and supported; and they – most importantly – foster productivity and pleasure in equal

measure (Sword, 2017, p. 139). Retreats tend to have a galvanizing effect and appear to be especially

powerful for female academics (Sword, 2017, p. 139).

Writing networks, as defined by Sword, are informal or semiformal alliances among writers

who support one another in various ways such as mentorship, friendship, collaboration, or

interdisciplinary exchanges (Sword, 2017, p. 142). They are generally associated with a disciplinary

community, academic organization or conference, or online forum, but they can appear elsewhere (Sword, 2017, p. 144).

On criticism and rejection

The twin fears of criticism and rejection cut to the heart of many writers, and these fears are a key component of some of the myths and barriers discussed earlier. This fear is not unwarranted – as Jensen notes, criticism is a key component of the academic review process by design (Jensen, 2017, p. 60). Boice advocates preparing for rejection by developing self-talk that diffuses the criticism and reviewing the script before opening the editorial letter (Boice, 1990, p. 105; p. 112). Jensen argues that the review process should be approached as a chance to improve our work, but acknowledges that responses can seem cruel and misguided. Successful writers maintain their momentum in the face of negative comments (Jensen, 2017, p. 97). Jensen advises draining the drama from the reviewing experience by remembering that no matter how cruel or unfair the review, it is still useful information that writers can use to make their work better (Jensen, 2017, p. 100). She advises thanking the editor, even in cases of rejection (Jensen, 2017, p. 102).

On what successful writers actually do

While Boice, Silvia, and Jensen all present plans for becoming productive writers, Sword takes a different approach in *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write* (2017). Sword's book is not a how-to based on her own experience, but rather a qualitative study consisting of in-depth interviews with 100 successful academics around the world, drawn from a wide range of fields. Perhaps not surprisingly, it turns out there is a wide range of writing habits even among these elite performers. As one example, Sword was influenced by Boice and is a daily writer, so she expected to find that this was the case with most of her subjects. However, she found that only a small percentage of the

population she interviewed systematically schedules daily writing throughout the year (Sword, 2017, p. 15). Rather, for most of the subjects, writing is neither daily nor rare – it is work that gets done in the spaces between the demands of academic and home life (Sword, 2017, p. 26). Among the "dailyists," she found they mostly took an individualistic approach as far as what constituted a session – some establish a word goal or page count, while others just require a small amount of forward progress (Sword, 2017, p. 21).

Sword pushes back against the prescriptivism in many of the works on academic productivity, arguing that one-size-fits-all solutions can lead to feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Instead, she found a flexible array of attitudes and attributes in her writers, which she dubs behavioral, artisanal, social and emotional (BASE) habits (Sword, 2017, p. 4).

Behavioral habits: Successful writers create space to write in a variety of ways, but they all demonstrate behavioral patterns. Key habits of mind she notes are persistence, determination, passion, pragmatism, and grit.

Artisanal habits: Successful writers conceive of writing as an artisanal activity that require ongoing learning and development of skills. Key habits of mind in this area are creativity, craft, artistry, patience, practice, (some) perfectionism, and passion for lifelong learning.

Social habits: Successful writers rarely work alone, even in "sole author" disciplines. They rely on others to provide them with support and feedback. They key habits of mind in this area are collegiality, collaboration, generosity, and openness to criticism and praise.

Emotional habits: Successful writers cultivate modes of thinking that emphasize pleasure, challenge, and growth. Key habits of mind in this area are positivity, enjoyment, satisfaction, risk taking, resilience, and luck (Sword, 2017, p. 4).

Sword extends these BASE habits into a metaphorical house of writing. Successful writers all

have these habits as cornerstones, but none constructs their house in the same way. In general, the

broader and more symmetric the base, the more spacious and stable the house, but writers are not

allotted a fixed quantity of square footage – and, in fact, the roof of the house can also be raised

(Sword, 2017, p. 5).

But what of the librarians?

The role of the librarian within the academy varies quite widely, with librarians holding faculty

status and tenure at some institutions, while at others they are non-tenured faculty, and at still other

places they are classed in staff or administrative ranks. Within all of these environments, the

expectations for research and publication vary. *Writing and Publishing: A Librarian's Guide* (2010)

provides a good overview of the many types of writing librarians may undertake, from newsletters to

children's literature to academic writing and beyond. For this reason, academic writing books may not

"fit" right out of the box. Additionally, graduate training for librarians is by necessity interdisciplinary,

with a stronger focus on professional skills than many programs in a single discipline. The work

environment of librarians is in some ways more structured than that of many teaching faculty – while

both professors and librarians regularly put in 40 or more hours per week of work, at many colleges

and universities professors have more flexibility with working hours and location than librarians. Public

services librarians, in particular, do not have the luxury of closing the door – a librarian's office hours

can be thought of as an all-day affair.

However, portions of the works are relevant. For example, a personal struggle I've faced is the

difficulty of finding the enjoyable project Jensen advises. Her book contains a chapter on finding these

projects, in which she outlines a technique called "following the lilt." In this exercise, the aspiring writer

describes their idea and the listener listens for the "lilt," the quality of voice when someone gets energetic describing something that interests them. In this way, the listener guides the speaker to the parts of their proposed project that are the truly interesting ones (Jensen, 2017, pp. 78-79).

Writing groups and the larger social aspects of writing are also mentioned in the library literature. Cynthia Tysick and Nancy Babb wrote about the Academic Writing Group at the University at Buffalo Libraries, stating that it has helped alleviate the stress associated with the tenure track (Tysick & Babb, 2006). Their group began as a critique group, but later changed into a group focused on academic peer-support dedicated to creating a solid foundation for new librarians. They also received support to organize a two day, off-campus writing retreat (Tysick & Babb, 2006). John Bullion and Stewart Brower also wrote about a writing retreat for health sciences librarians in conjunction with the South Central Chapter of the Medical Library Association annual meetings in 2012, 2013, and 2014, stating was that it was a cost-effective and easily adaptable format for conferences and other institutions to adopt (Bullion & Brower, 2017). Their retreat included both writing time, critique, and the development of post-retreat writing plans. There are two chapters in *Writing and Publishing: A Librarian's Guide*, both of which deal with critique groups (Mathson, pp. 34-35; Maxwell, pp. 36-37). It is notable that these articles focus (or begin with a focus) on critique, given that this form of group is either not mentioned or explicitly cautioned against in the books reviewed earlier.

On lessons learned

Is there one right way to write? Having examined three books that contend there is (albeit with varying "right" ways of doing it) and one that takes a wider view, my answer is no, there is no one right way to write for everyone. It may be, however, that everyone has their own, individual "right" way to write. Still, these books are worthwhile for those struggling with writing, though the advice aimed at

teaching faculty may require additional tailoring for academic librarians, who often have different

demands on their time. It is my hope that this essay can provide guidance to other librarians who face

the same apprehension or block about writing.

<div align="center">References</div>

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