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THE SECRET TO ADDING ARTICLE WRITING TO YOUR LIFE

J. Patrick Biddix, Ph.D.

Many potential authors we talk with tell us time is their biggest detriment to writing. Looking at the countless sessions at Association of Fraternity Advisors (AFA), ACPA: College Student Educators International (ACPA), and NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) annual meetings on time management, it is easy to see time as an adversary to writing for publication. When I transitioned to faculty life, I thought I would suddenly have writing/research time as one of my “thirds” (teaching, research, service), but I soon found myself reading books on time management (and recognizing the irony) realizing little had changed since my practitioner days. That is, until I attended a workshop session that drastically and effectively changed my writing productivity.

American Educational Research Association’s (AERA) Emerging Scholars is an annual program aimed at helping early career scholars (both faculty and staff, aspiring and established), map and implement a research agenda. A highlight was the session on planning and productivity, led by a panel of top early and late career scholars. Pen in hand, I was ready for earth-shaking advice. So what was this hidden treasure? This sagely guidance I’d missed all these years? *Schedule yourself a writing day.*

Wait a minute, what??? At first, I dismissed what I thought was rather simplistic – a writing day? Every day is a writing day! I’m a faculty member now; I don’t have to sneak writing between governing council meetings any longer. I’ve got time built into my career. I’m supposed to be writing all the time. I found myself defensive, yet silently asking, what is a writing day anyway?

A writing day, according to the panel, is an inflexible part of your week devoted to research. More specifically, it is devoted to writing, not conducting research or reading. As the presenter who introduced this continued, I understood the mistakes I had been making. A writing day, she noted is not a Monday, which is a catch-up day. Friday is out, because you are hopefully reorganizing and preparing for the next week. The same goes for the weekend, which should be a combination of family, work catch-up, and relaxing activities. So, that leaves Tuesday-Thursday. Take out meeting-heavy days, during work time (if you are bound to a 9-5 schedule), meals, and any other constraints and you have your writing day.

For two years as a faculty member, and three before that as a practitioner, I had tried the “I will write when I get a free second method,” which I met with limited success. In the fall, we added an infant to our family, so a writing day, or more precisely, a few writing hours, became a necessity. For me, it was Thursday morning. From 8-1, I wrote. I did not look at email, I did not schedule meetings or calls (except for emergencies) – I wrote. Here is where the importance of setting rules came in: I chose this time because 1) I write better “fresh,” first thing in the morning, 2) Thursday was late enough in the week that I could pull articles or look over my data during the week, 3) I teach at night, so it was not interfering with class and more importantly, 4) my office was quiet.

At the end of the semester, I was astonished. I had submitted four articles for publication (two with new research, two that have been sitting as drafts in my stack for a year). Once I got into my flow, I found time on other days for writing. I had effectively changed my productivity routine. With just a few hours a week I gained productivity and lost guilt, since I now knew exactly when I'd be back at my computer.

Reflecting back, I can make a few important observations about this seemingly much shorter (but in reality much more productive) schedule. I tended to mistake looking up/reading research, catching up to where I left off, and/or conducting parts of a study with actual writing. That was an enormous mistake. Writing days are only for writing. I tend to have 15 minutes here or there during the week I can use for quick literature searches, article reads, or jotting notes. Then, when writing day comes, I write instead of being distracted by these other tasks. In the end, like completing a dissertation, persistence is critical – especially when there is no real deadline and no one is watching over your shoulder. If you truly want to write for publication, you have to commit to it and defining a writing day is a huge first step.

My writing day only works because I am ruthless about the time. It goes without saying that there had to be some upfront negotiation with work, family, friends, and myself. My dean was supportive, excusing me from any meetings during my writing day, my wife was similarly encouraging, and my students understood. You can get Dr. Biddix any time, but unless it is an emergency, Thursday is his writing day. As a practitioner, I worked under a dean who was similarly supportive, but I found that dissertation time for me had to be after hours because of students stopping by, random meetings, and the general life of an advisor. To write at night, however, I still had to be very protective of my schedule.

Perhaps you have really been wanting to get a submission into *Oracle* and even have some of it written? Or, perhaps you are considering a Ph.D. and are worried about the dissertation? I tell my students the same thing – your writing day is neither flexible nor negotiable. That is your time to write. You will be astonished at how far even just a two hour session, the same time each week, can go. The important thing is that the day/time does not get changed, pushed off, or postponed. At the end of your session, make yourself a note at the top of the page you've been working on to catch you up the next time. If inspiration strikes add to the note as you need, but know that come writing day, you'll be focused and ready to work.

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