



The Hixon Writing Center at Caltech

## Making the Most of Your Writing Time

*This handout is designed to help you integrate the practice of writing into your schedule so that you can give yourself the time you need to hone your skills and produce the best writing possible.*

In *Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics*, Joli Jensen argues that we thrive as writers when we have “brief, frequent, low-stress/high-reward encounters” with a writing project we enjoy (78). While we at the writing center cannot guarantee that you will enjoy every writing assignment you’re given, we can help you make your writing time as efficient and productive as possible.

One of the easiest ways to get sidetracked in your writing is to procrastinate. When we procrastinate, we engage in marathon, infrequent, high-stress encounters with the act of writing – exactly what we shouldn’t do. This approach to writing creates a vicious cycle where the more we procrastinate, the less positive our experiences with writing become, and the more we want to put off working on future writing projects.

### **Why do we procrastinate? And, what can we do about it?**

In order to unpack the procrastination trap, it is important to understand why we do it. Here are some of the most common reasons writers procrastinate:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) We are too busy.** This is especially true for Caltech students, who must often balance a wide array of course-related and extracurricular activities.

How can we build writing time into our schedules?

- **Get away from thinking that writing must consume long blocks of time.** Busy people have to find creative ways to work writing into their already crowded schedules. This might mean taking brainstorming notes on your smartphone between meetings or getting up a half hour early to find some quiet writing time.
- **Proactively Establish a Writing Schedule.** When we talk about writing time, we often talk about it as something that can be found or made, but we would encourage you to think of it as something that must be scheduled and protected.

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<sup>1</sup> This list is based on the one provided by Joli Jensen in *Write No Matter What* where she lists the following writing myths that must be challenged in order for academic writers to be productive: The Magnum Opus Myth (47-51), The Impostor Syndrome (52-55), The Cleared-Deck Fantasy (56-59), The Hostile Reader Fear (60-62), Compared with X (63-66), The Perfect First Sentence (67-70), and One More Source (71-74).

- Instead of writing for six hours the night before an essay is due, **schedule several 30- to 60-minute blocks of time across a few days or even weeks.**
- **Plan to attend your professor's office hours** at key moments in your writing process. For instance, you might stop by while brainstorming and then stop by again with a draft. Some professors are even willing to read drafts in advance of meetings, so check if this is an option.
- **Schedule an appointment with one of the peer tutors and/or writing specialists at the Hixon Writing Center.** This will help keep you motivated and provide you with clear deadlines, structured writing time, and support.

**(2) We think we work better under pressure.** This is one of the most common things we tell ourselves, and it tends to be self-reinforcing: we only *think* we work better this way because we have no other data from which to draw. Most students find that, while this can allow them to “get by” early in their college careers, it makes later coursework more difficult.

How can we incentivize our writing without waiting until the last minute?

- **Create pressure before the official due date.** Many of us wait until the last minute because we need to feel like our writing is an urgent and immediate concern so that we can justify making time for it in our busy schedules. This may even be a crucial part of creating the psychological space to write when we have a million other things to do. So, try setting yourself a personal deadline a week or two (or, for smaller projects, a two or three days) before your paper is due. That way, you will have time to revise and think about your paper before submitting it. Need help keeping that deadline? Schedule an appointment with your professor and/or the writing center to review the work you want to have completed by your deadline.

**(3) We think we have to write something amazing right away.** Many of us are perfectionists who cannot bear producing anything that is less than wonderful. However, writing is messy. It is a process that allows us to explore complex ideas, and this makes it an activity that is rife with error, uncertainty, and false starts.

What is a perfectionist to do?

- **Write a terrible first draft.** All good writing comes from what author Anne Lamott calls “shitty first drafts.” So, part of learning to write productively is learning to embrace the reality that writing is *not* about achieving perfection. The first draft is for you, the writer. Leave yourself time to revise and produce the later drafts that your readers will see.

**(4) We have trouble getting started.** Creating something out of nothing is intimidating for all writers.

How can we get past the blank screen?

- **Start with the part of the paper you feel prepared to write.** The first words you write don't need to be the first sentences of the paper. For writers in the humanities, this may mean starting by writing textual analysis and temporarily setting aside difficult questions about what your argument will be. For writers in STEM fields, it may be easiest to start by writing the methods and results, which often feel easier to write than the introduction and discussion.

**(5) We are worried about how our writing will be received.** Writing can be a difficult thing to share with others because we often see it as an expression of ourselves and how much we know.

How can we build up the courage to share our writing - especially our works-in-progress - with others?

- **Remember that your writing is a reflection of where you are with a project – not a reflection of what you're capable of doing.** While we naturally want our writing to speak well for us, this can become problematic when a fear of what our writing will say keeps us from writing. In order to write well and often, we have to let go of the idea that our writing is the truest register of our intellectual abilities. It's not. Writing is an active experience of thinking and experimentation. We are gaining important skills and seeing whether certain strategies will work for us or not.
- **Enlist the support of non-judgmental readers.** If the thought of red ink being spilled on your paper gives you nightmares, find a reader (like one of us at the writing center) who can provide you with supportive, productive feedback. Not only does this help you become more comfortable with getting feedback on your writing, it can also help you feel more confident that the writing you're submitting for evaluation communicates your ideas as clearly as possible.
- **Talk to your professors.** If you're intimidated by the prospect of having your writing evaluated by your professors, speak with them one-on-one about your work. Their goal is to help you learn, not to criticize you.

**(6) We think we will write more effectively if we take care of everything else on our to-do list first.** The reality is that there is no ideal writing scenario where there is nothing else on our minds or our to-do lists.<sup>2</sup>

How can you write when there are so many other things to do?

- **Write for a specific, realistic, and manageable amount of time.** Momentarily put the rest of your to-do list on a backburner and tell yourself that you will begin to tackle it once you've written a certain number of pages or for a specific amount of time.

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<sup>2</sup> In their handout on procrastination, the UNC writing center observes that “[i]n order to break the procrastination habit, we need to get past the idea that in order to write, we must have all the information pertaining to the topic, and we must have optimal writing conditions. In reality, writers never have all the information, and conditions are never optimal.”

**(7) We get stuck in the reading.** By its very nature, academic work requires that we read widely and think deeply about things. This may even be your favorite part of being in college. While reading and researching are crucial parts of the writing process, they can also be crutches that allow us to stall our writing while allowing us to *feel* productive.

How do we know when it's time to emerge from the reading?

- **Connect your reading to your writing.** When we're reading, it can be easy to feel like we need to understand everything before we start writing. However, if writing is a means of understanding complex concepts, then it will be necessary to start writing before you feel you've mastered your reading. So, we would encourage you to treat reading and writing as interrelated processes, not as separate practices. This means that you may need to compose a first draft where you write about a key passage in the reading in order to fully understand it (then, of course, be sure to revise with your new understanding in mind).

### Works Consulted

We consulted a number of works on this topic to create this handout, and you'll find their references here. This is not an exhaustive list of all works on this topic, and we encourage you to seek out additional resources as needed. This citation guide is in MLA format, and it is only a citation model if you are also writing in MLA style.

Jensen, Joli. *Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics*. The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

"Procrastination." *The Writing Center, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*, 2017, <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/procrastination/>

*Want to talk to someone about the information in this handout or how to apply it to your own writing? Make an appointment to come into the HWC and talk with a professional or peer tutor: [writing.caltech.edu/tutoring](http://writing.caltech.edu/tutoring)*



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