

Three

Eight Strategies for Getting Writing Done

Different people have different ways of getting writing done. A colleague of mine swears that he spends months planning out an essay, laying out its evidence, structuring its arguments, and mortaring its outline. Then he sits down and writes the thing, all in order, in the course of a few days. Another friend doesn't write for months, then goes on two- or three-day sleepless writing binges; she emerges from her cave bearing the living body of an annunciated Jesus.

Neither of these strategies works for me. In fact I think they're a little bit crazy, and wouldn't recommend them to an enemy. But both these friends have published as much work as I have, so . . . your mileage may vary. The advice that follows borrows extensively from the history of my own writing practice, and has been good, so far as I know, for that of a number of friends and former students. If you can get things done by binge-writing or planning meticulously ahead, go for it; we're all just skinning cats in whatever way possible. If not, however, the following might help.

Let's start with fear. I am terrified—seriously terrified—of academic writing. Nothing that I do confronts me as strongly with a fear of total, consuming incompetence and inadequacy. The problem is that I am trying to be great, and I am (quite reasonably, unfortunately) afraid that I am not great. As a result I am occasionally tempted to take the advice the doctor gives the man who says, "It hurts when I do this": "Stop doing that." And it is probably true that giving up on being great would make

writing easier for me. When I write for *Printculture*, or when I worked as a journalist at the Associated Press, I never felt the anxiety I associate with scholarly writing. I also don't feel it when writing e-mails, annual reports, grant applications, or grocery lists. Those kinds of writing can be boring or institutionally complicated, but they don't involve a confrontation with the fear that I am not as good as I would like to be.

Unfortunately, at some level the ambition to do great work—to write something that matters not just to me but also to the community of peers I care most about, the people whose work I respect and admire most—is central to the ethos of why I write scholarship at all. I cannot imagine giving up on it, since to do so would be to settle for producing mediocre essays. As a matter of career survival, it is possible to get by on work one knows is mediocre, but, for me at least, such a thing would make it impossible to go on. I don't have to be great, but I have to be *trying* for greatness.

What this means is that everything that is weak in me—everything that would have me sleep another hour, avoid working out, put off cleaning the house, or delay a necessary apology to a friend—struggles to keep me from writing, fights to have me give up and be satisfied with the sentences I already have or the essays I've already published.

Your own psychological structure may differ—you may be afraid of something entirely different—but in general all academic writers suffer from some kind of writing fear. Students often hear that half of the people who start graduate school don't finish. One of the main stumbling blocks is the dissertation, which is the first encounter students have to the kinds of professional writing demands and practices that will govern the rest of their academic careers. Those demands and practices produce a specific form of anxiety. The ultimate truth about graduate school is that successful academics are not always the smartest ones in their cohorts. They're the ones who manage that anxiety well, who learn to live with their fears and continue, despite everything, to write.

Here follow eight rules that have helped me realize that continuance.

1. *Write daily.* This is the oldest trick in the book: accomplish psychologically difficult tasks by making them habitual. Habits mitigate much of the difficulty in the psychological *choice* to do something unpleasant, instead turning it into the kind of automatic behavior that allows us all to

continue brushing our teeth on a daily basis (and flossing on the morning before a visit to the dentist). Building habits, however, can be difficult: a 2009 study by Phillippa Lally and her collaborators at University College, London, found that habitual automaticity takes on average sixty-six days to build—meaning that it takes about two months until something is as habitual as it's going to get. Automaticity, the research suggested, takes longer for tasks requiring more self-discipline; making a habit of daily sit-ups will be harder than eating a daily piece of fruit. (Overall, participants in Lally's study took between 18 and 254 days to form a habit, but some did not form a habit at all, suggesting that individual differences will matter a great deal when developing habit automaticity.) What all this suggests is that you should plan on at least two months of steady, solid self-discipline to create a new habit. But the good news for most people is that, at some point, automaticity will kick in and make things much, much easier.

Writing every day is difficult because everyone has any number of other things to do, most of which frighten them much less than writing. The key is to carve out a very small period of time for writing each day, putting it in both your physical and mental calendars, and convincing yourself that having that time is a way of *taking care of yourself*. Once that is done, you need to protect your writing time vigorously, both from others and from yourself. This means definitively scheduling this time and not moving it around or interrupting it, even when it seems perfectly reasonable to do so. Doctors, plumbers, teachers, friends, students, and even your family and children will all live, and live happily, if you consistently refuse to be available from, say, 9 to 10 every morning. Or even 9 to 9:30.

I recommend the morning for two reasons: first, research by Stanford University's Kelly McGonigal has shown that willpower is a finite psychological resource that gets used up over the course of a day and replenished in sleep. This means that you have more willpower in the morning than you do in the afternoon. As a result it's far easier to build and keep difficult habits in the morning. You can save your willpower-depleted evenings for other, easier habits, like having a drink after dinner. Second, practicing virtuous behavior in the morning lets you feel good about yourself for the rest of the day. I've found that it's impossible to really enjoy your afternoon if you have an unpleasant task waiting for you at 5:00 P.M. Whereas

having coffee with friends or watching a show on TV at the end of a day in which you've faced and bested your demons feels like an appropriate reward for your maternal virtue.

How long should you write? During the school year, when you're teaching, thirty minutes a day is fantastic. If you manage to average slightly more than that—by writing for an hour or two, perhaps, on days when you don't teach—you're doing incredibly well. During the summer or on school breaks I tend to write for three to four-and-a-half hours a day, always in a sequence of three sessions: 9:30–11:00 A.M., a break for lunch, 11:45 A.M. to 1:00 P.M., another break for a snack and internet, and then 1:30–3:00 P.M. I've found that I can't really concentrate for much longer than ninety minutes, and sometimes I actually can't make it through the third session. When that happens I switch over to reading, or sometimes I just take a break. But that's just me. Other friends have been using and praising Francesco Cirillo's "Pomodoro Technique," which involves breaking work up into 25-minute chunks followed by short breaks. You might try, during the school year, writing for one or two Pomodoros a day, and expanding those periods during breaks. What both patterns have in common is that they are patterns. I suspect that the fact of having a pattern matters more than which pattern it really is.

Part of building this habit involves speaking about it to others. Narrating your process (I do X for Y minutes a day; I do X for Z minutes during breaks; then I start again) by sharing it with friends helps externalize it, and makes it something that exists outside your own drive and desire. A pattern's external existence makes it easier for you to feel responsible to it, rather than treating it as an easily modifiable expression of your current mood or state of affairs. In other words, it makes it a habit.

For about eight years I gave myself word-count goals, but I've since stopped focusing so much on counts because it was making me nervous. In summer I still aim for around two pages a day, and on days I reach that aim early I sometimes call it quits to celebrate. I essentially have two goals: two pages or three sessions of writing, whichever comes first. That way I can be assured of accomplishing something, without putting pressure on myself to write 600 words of new material. Some days what you already have written needs to be worked on before you can move forward; concentrating on that labor, and allowing it to count as

Fortifying Your Habit

A writing habit will benefit from being located inside a series of actions and spaces, both physical and temporal, that function as its enabling context. Together these can create a pattern of physical and mental activity that enables you to get work done. For instance, I only write in my office. I begin serious writing days by establishing a sensory space governed by white “noise”: I put on headphones (always listening to something I know well, usually Radiohead, seven or eight albums in a row on repeat) and I begin chewing gum (this helps me concentrate; it’s like white noise for your mouth). I then start playing Freecell (a solitaire card game); the focus it requires helps me begin to shut out other noises and concerns. After about fifteen minutes, I open the relevant document files and begin to work. For lunch I eat the same thing every day (a bagel with cream cheese); likewise for the snack that comes after the second writing session. I only leave my office to go to the bathroom, but I keep my headphones on and avoid talking to people. I have the phone, internet browser, and e-mail shut down (though I do browse, and sometimes check e-mail, during breaks). Together these practices aim to put me into what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has called a “flow” state, in which I become fully immersed in the writing task, essentially unaware of the passage of time or of the world outside my work. The micro-habits associated with the larger habit of writing help protect and insulate my writing practice; they create a pathway into, and out of, the mental discipline I need to get over my anxieties and begin to write.

meeting a goal, helps prevent tying yourself to unrealistic and unproductive goal-making.

Nonetheless I want to point out that if you can average two pages a day when you are not teaching—which shouldn’t sound like much to someone who can write three seminar papers in three weeks—you can finish a full draft of a dissertation in one hundred days of writing, or roughly five months of work; or you can get a hundred pages of writing done in a summer. (This is assuming you don’t write on the weekends; I generally don’t). You’ll have to rewrite and revise that dissertation, which will take at least another five or six months. Throw in another six to eight months of reading and you’re at about a year and a half. Give yourself another half year for things to go wrong and get fixed, and your total time invested reaches roughly two years.

Though that may sound reasonable, almost no one I know has written a dissertation in less time than that. Why not? Mostly, I think, because they came into the dissertation having to learn how to really write one—not only how to write the actual chapters as chapters (and not as seminar papers), but how to develop a practice of writing that would support the sustained, longer process of production and revision that dissertations needed. As a result much of their time was spent learning both a new writing practice and a new written genre. Their first chapters became the laboratories of that practice, and thus often took a full year to write. If graduate programs taught writing more comprehensively and responsibly, we could avoid some of that wasted time and especially avoid the cruelty of its psychological effects on students, who spend that first chapter wondering whether they're going to make it, whether they're good enough, whether they'll run out of funding, and so on, when they should be working on their research, their sentences, and their arguments. If your dissertation is still ahead of you, the best thing you can do for yourself is to develop a set of writing habits now that will allow you to come into that challenge as a successful writer.

Another advantage of writing to a rule each day is that it frees you, psychologically, from one of the more difficult forms of anxiety in our profession: not knowing when it's ok to not be writing. I struggled a great deal in graduate school with guilt and unease over how much I wrote because, of course, I could *always* have been writing. I could have slept less; I could have played fewer computer games; I could have gone out less often with friends. At its worst that guilt made it hard for me to enjoy the fun things I was doing. By doing my writing first and establishing a set of habits that validated my own work process, I not only knew when I should be working, I also knew when I didn't have to be working. That I was good company at all during those years owes itself largely to the fact that, having written my two pages a day, usually by sometime around 3:00 P.M., I knew I was allowed to enjoy myself. This is also, by the way, why I prefer to write in the office: it helps build habit automaticity by giving me a standard place to write, but it also helps me know that when I am not in the office, I don't have to be working, leaving me free to enjoy home life.

2. *Make small goals and meet them.* Whether you choose to write for a time or to a word count, you will sometimes not reach your goal for the day. One of the most important things my advisor Jane Gallop taught me was that unmet goals don't create habits. For this reason you absolutely need to focus on giving yourself *small, easily achievable* goals. Don't plan to write four pages a day; don't try to write eight hours a day (or two hours a day when you're teaching). Focus on the slow and steady. Your job is to making meeting goals a regular part of your life, to become a *goal-meeting person*.

Among other things this principle determines how you behave when you miss a goal. Lally's research shows that people who miss occasional goals do not suffer much when it came to automating habits. It's only when you make a huge deal of the missed goal that it can become one. So you should try to forgive yourself immediately if you fail to meet a daily goal. For the same reason that you don't desert a diet because you had three hamburgers at the barbeque, or give up on mastering a step-over move because you missed a day of soccer practice, you cannot allow small lapses in habit-creating behavior to alter the general structure governing your work process. Look forward: if you can't eliminate your guilt by forgiving yourself, concentrate on meeting today's goal, and feeling good about doing so.

Above all, don't add today's "gap" to tomorrow's task. If you only wrote one page today, that does not mean you have to write three pages tomorrow. Sitting down to write three pages is harder than sitting down to write two, which makes your habit-creating pattern that much harder to begin. Those extra pages have a way of spiraling out of control, leading to a day when, faced with the idea that you have to "catch up" by ten pages or so, you simply give up and eat a bag of Doritos instead. (I have done this, by the way. The chips were delicious.)

Making and meeting small goals also determines the kind of relationship you have with yourself. I don't want to live in a world in which some part of me regularly punishes another part of me for not behaving well, in which I simultaneously occupy the roles of Marine drill sergeant and recruit ("Get up maggot!! If you're not puking, you're not working!!"). I find it more helpful (and this really is true) to imagine that the part of me

that knuckles down is working on behalf of the part of me that would prefer to avoid the writing scene entirely, and I do my best to be grateful for all the things that first part of me has helped the complete entity known as “Eric Hayot” accomplish. (I realize this is a little weird, but honestly, it’s how it works for me. When I write I occasionally leave notes to myself in my file at the end of the day offering encouragement to the me of tomorrow. The most embarrassing of these, written sometime in 2006, read: “Good job, Eric. You are a very good boy.”) Knowing what I am and am not capable of helps me set goals that I can reach, and creates a pattern of self-motivation and self-reward that keeps me happy.

For that same reason you should also reward yourself for meeting goals. If you have ten pages by Thursday, take a Friday off to celebrate. Or spend the day writing, but without any pressure to reach a limit or to continue when you’re tired. Such “windfall” writing (the term is Paul Silva’s) often turns out to be the best of your week. Go easy. Focus on building the habits, not on defeating or overmastering them. Treat yourself as though you care about yourself (even if, as is so often true, you sometimes can’t, or don’t). Developing a two-page-a-day habit during breaks from school will be enough to finish a dissertation, get tenure, and have a significant and serious career as a publishing writer.

3. *When you’re stuck, keep writing.* Of course, you will get stuck. You will get stuck on a macro level, when after three or four months of work you lose faith in your article or chapter and fear that you may need to start over. And you will get stuck on a micro level, having days where it feels like you’re going backwards, or ones when you simply can’t write anything at all.

The solution to both problems is the same: keep writing. Many micro-level problems can be solved by opening up a new file and freewriting for five to ten minutes. Freewriting is typing or handwriting, nonstop, whatever comes into your head. I usually start with, “Eric, you are now beginning to freewrite. You are stuck in the article because you cannot . . .” Don’t stop typing or moving your pen; don’t censor yourself; don’t correct spelling errors. Just commit to writing nonstop for a set period of time. Often over the course of ten minutes you will write your way into a solution, or find that at some point your prose switches over from “free” to focused and engaged, adopting midstream the vocabulary and sentence

structures of your project. For less serious problems, you may simply want to force yourself to sit at your desk for just a bit longer. (One of my automatic responses to feeling stuck is to want to walk away from the computer. Whenever I feel my leg muscles beginning to lift me off the chair, I force myself to sit and stare at the screen for five more minutes. Sometimes I freewrite a few sentences. Nine out of ten times this gets me through the problem.)

For larger problems, I recommend two approaches: first, go back and reread everything you have. Initially you may simply want to do this as a way of revising and rethinking, so that you spend your time reworking sentences and paragraphs, adding or removing metalanguage, and seeing more clearly the structure that you have so far. At some point you may want to create an outline of the work you have, describing as clearly as you can to yourself the logic of your argument and the organization of its evidence (read more on structure in part 2). Then spend some time writing a description (in sentences) of the outline of your piece, discussing the ways in which what you have sets up later parts of the structure, or creates promises and obligations to fulfill. Sometimes the answer to being stuck lies not in the sentences but in the structure. Seeing how the structure may be causing your problem will be enough to allow you to alter it and make the problem disappear.

If you are still stuck, a good second approach is to have a friend, colleague, or advisor read your work and talk the problem through. We all have a tendency to only show our writing to people when we're happy with it. I can always tell when my graduate students are struggling because they start avoiding me in the hallways or on e-mail. Their writing is not going well; they miss a few days of work in despair; they begin to feel guilty; they want to solve the problem before they see me again. But this is crazy behavior, like only going to see the doctor when you're well. Part of my *job*, I tell students, is to help them write their dissertations. If they avoid me when things are going badly, I cannot help. And I want to help!

If you don't have a helpful advisor, try very hard to build up a network of peers with whom to share work. I believe in and have enjoyed writing groups, including an excellent one in Los Angeles, though often I get more out of group discussions from commenting on the work of others than I do from hearing about my own. (Part of the problem is that more than two

The Writing Camp

One of the things I've done over the years is to organize a writing weekend with a good friend. We do the reading ahead of time, then get together and devote one day to one person's work, the next to the other's. (Two chapters are usually about enough for a weekend.) With more time, I've done something weeklong, in which a friend and I wrote in the mornings, read each other's material in the early afternoons, and talked about the work over drinks in the evening. These camps have been great both for improving my work and for strengthening friendships; they're as much about the pleasure of being engaged with one another as about the writing that they help make possible.

or three people talking about writing makes everyone too nice, and usually not specific enough.) I prefer to share writing one-on-one with close friends, people whose opinions I trust and, most importantly, who give me the kind of writing advice I know will be useful to me. Lucky people will make such friends in graduate school, though I did it mostly afterwards—and in fact still continue to collect new friends with whom I share work.

Above all, do not give up. Two especially pernicious fantasies lie at the root of many forms of blockage: the idea that you are supposed to get everything right the first time around (because everyone else does, allegedly), and the fear that you have somehow reached a limit (of ability) beyond which you cannot pass. Try not to make up crazy rules about how long it should take you to finish or what your process should look like. Don't hold yourself to imaginary standards: I once told my teacher Kristie Kaufman that I was hoping the third chapter of my dissertation would only take me four drafts, since the previous two had taken five each and I thought four would be an improvement. "Why do you care?" she asked. "Maybe it just takes you five drafts to make things good." "Good" is the standard. No one ever got any bonus points for finishing in three drafts instead of five, or three weeks instead of two months; no one has ever praised or published a bad book on the grounds that it only took a year to write. And try not to despair unreasonably. My friend Greg Jackson once told me that he wouldn't allow himself to get depressed until he had spent as long on a new project as he had on the previous successful one.

If your last thing took you a year to get right (and it probably did) then it's actually *not rational* to worry too much before that much time has passed. Maybe it just takes you a year to make things good.

4. *Avoid virtuous procrastination.* Academics who procrastinate have a hard time noticing that they're doing so, mainly because they have moved beyond the more obvious forms of undergraduate procrastination (going out with friends, playing video games, frequent tanning, etc.) to its advanced and subtler virtuous modes. The classic structure of virtuous procrastination involves cleaning the house or doing the dishes instead of writing. Unpleasantness is relative: if the chapter terrifies you, cleaning your house feels like a walk in the park. Whatever *looks* like an obstacle to your writing—a filthy house, for example—is most likely a problem you yourself have imagined into being to keep from having to write.

The most common form of virtuous procrastination for well-meaning academics is teaching: I can't write, because I have to prep for class; I didn't work today, because I had so many papers to grade. And so on. The special appeal of teaching as a form of procrastination stems from three things: its capacity to make us feel knowledgeable and powerful; its virtuous service to others; and the institutional inexorability of its weekly rhythms. Writing by contrast makes us feel weak and afraid; serves only ourselves; and is not, on a weekly basis, the subject of any institutional demand. That teaching and writing are both parts of the general academic "job" makes it easy to shift effort and justification from one to the other; most people wouldn't bat an eye at the idea that you had to do one part of your job instead of a different part of your job. Unlike taking care of the kids or waiting at home for the plumber, teaching and writing belong (or seem to belong) to the same field of activity. But this apparent fungibility conceals the deep emotional differences between them. It is because teaching is so much *easier* than writing that we choose to do it instead.

When I talk to students about this, I repeat advice given to me in graduate school by Gregory Jay: your job in graduate school is not to become the best graduate teacher ever. No one ever got a Ph.D. for teaching well. Your job is to write a good dissertation and to develop the skills that will allow you to have a successful career. You will be tempted to deeply immerse yourself in your teaching; having spent some eighteen years as students, you identify heavily with the classroom, and you dream of one day being

a professor. For that reason the lure of teaching will be especially strong. Resist! Though accounting may make it look like the university is paying you to teach (you're called a "teaching assistant," after all), these jobs were only given to people the faculty thought could become great scholars. Do a good, decent job in the classroom, but do not forget what got you admitted into graduate school and what will get you out: your ability to do scholarly research in your field.

The same advice holds for faculty on the tenure track. Their job responsibilities are clearer, but the temptation to use power and strength in the classroom as compensation for feelings of weakness or inadequacy on the page is no less strong. If you want to have a successful publishing career, you absolutely must resist this tendency and especially resist the impingements on your writing time created by department meetings, student advising, or informal chats with colleagues. These things do matter, but they will cease to matter if you lose your job for not publishing enough. Good colleagues will give you similar advice, and good department heads will protect you from the most egregious demands upon your time. In the absence of a good head or decent colleagues, take care of yourself, and chat with friends when you're dead. (Kidding. But seriously, chat *after* writing.)

None of this is intended to be dismissive or contemptuous of teaching. I love teaching, and have benefited tremendously from a series of generous and devoted teachers. Teaching well has positive pragmatic consequences, both for your ability to get tenure and for your own sense of power and pride in your professional life. I have never found it helpful to think of teaching as a drag on writing, as a useless task to be shed as quickly as possible so that I can get back to my real (research) work. The idea that writing is real work and teaching is not makes me totally crazy. The students are our work too.

So please understand: I am warning you against making teaching a *substitute* for writing, against using teaching as an excuse not to write, and against letting teaching fill all your available free time so that it feels like you literally cannot write. If you can manage not to do that, and if you can build some good habits around your writing practice, you will enjoy your teaching more because you will know that it is not keeping you from meeting your other professional goals.

Most forms of procrastination come from not forcing yourself to start writing. But another kind, quite common among academics, has to do with people who cannot stop working on their projects. People who get stuck this way often fear the criticism that comes with evaluation; sometimes they believe (consciously or unconsciously) that their work must be perfect before it can be finished. As long as they have not quite finished, as long more research can be done and more revising and polishing can take place, the work is not “complete.” Since it is incomplete, its flaws do not yet count—they are, in fact, not flaws but successes-in-waiting. By avoiding placing their work before its final juries (like editors of journals or dissertation committees), such procrastinators postpone the moment of judgment for as long as they can. One person I know postponed it all the way through the tenure decision—and was denied tenure, having written hundreds of pages without ever having submitted an article to a journal or a book manuscript to a press.

Unwillingness to finish is especially dangerous in graduate school, where students who conceive of their dissertations as magnum opuses will spend endless years polishing and extending 300-, 400-, or 500-page manuscripts. (Such students should be stopped by caring faculty, but are often not.) Your dissertation is not, you should hope, your only book and certainly not your best book; it’s not even, or not exactly, your first book. Letting it go and having it be evaluated—as painful as that moment can be—will push you closer to writing something that will meet the standards of the profession, which will allow you to graduate, and (*inshallah*) to begin a career.

As with most psychological structures, patterns of procrastination or impatience can be quite difficult to catch in process. But your goal need not be never to procrastinate. Instead, it should be to get slowly better at recognizing the patterns of your own virtuous deferrals and to catch them within days or a week instead of letting them stop you up for months. Today, a decade and more since my graduation, I still procrastinate, usually by reading too much or by letting administrative work use up my writing days. The difference between now and then is that I catch myself sooner and faster, and have developed habits that allow me to quickly return to positive, productive writing practices. Among the most important of these is regular conversation with friends about how my writing

is going. Lies you use to protect yourself from fear ring false, and louder, when you tell them to someone else.

Beyond teaching and housework, the other major form of virtuous procrastination involves caring for children and other family members. Here the warning is, again, not to neglect doing these things, but to avoid doing them as substitutes for writing. But you will also recognize in the coming together of these three forms of affective labor the bleak shadow of the gender system. Given that these forms of work and care fall most often and hardest on women, people who care about ending sexism ought to work to build departments and universities that mitigate the conflicts between personal and professional life. Along the way you will understand that no psychological analysis like the one attempted here happens free of the institutional patterns that govern it, whether from above or below. Since this book is focused mainly on what you can do to get yourself to write, I will allow this brief mention of that fact to stand in for a general reading of the institutions, and, therefore, as a nod towards a certain incompleteness.

5. *Make fear an ally.* Most people imagine that their goal is to stop being afraid of writing. I am saying something quite different: any writing that aims to be great or even good will be by nature frightening, because it challenges you to do your very best work and forces you to acknowledge that your very best work may not live up to your most ambitious vision of yourself. Fear of writing is therefore inevitable. Your job is to manage that fear, not destroy it.

(It is possible, I suppose, that someone out there writes without fear. For no one is it all fear, all the time. My fear, for example, is mixed at times with a great deal of self-belief or even arrogance, both of which help me break through the impulse to give up. But I imagine wholly fearless writing as complacent writing—writing that is too self-assured, too confident about what it is doing to be ready for intellectual or stylistic surprise. Such fearless writing would be writing that wasn't learning anything. This is why no one fears writing e-mail.)

One way to manage fear is to use it to recognize opportunities within the framework of your argument or your prose. Another is to let it protect you from complacency.

On the first count, you must move from a general fear of writing to a specific fear located in the piece you're currently working on. If you are stuck, ask: What am I most afraid of here? What scares me the most about

this paragraph, this transition, this paragraph, or this essay? Freewrite on the question for a few minutes. Then, instead of thinking of the fear as an obstacle to be overcome, begin imagining it as the solution to an intellectual problem. Open by addressing the fear, not as fear but as a knot or interpretive conundrum that has laid itself out before the reader. You can do this with metalanguage, writing something like, “The thing I was most afraid of when I wrote this chapter was that the analysis would be unable to bring together in a coherent whole the various pieces of evidence collected here.” This is a high-risk strategy requiring delicate handling and best used rarely. But you can change that metadiscursive statement into the beginning of a problem and an argument, like so: “How can we connect Smith’s writings on metallurgy with his literary works? What kind of historical or contextual responsibility emerges when we recognize that as a writer, Smith spent far more time detailing his experiments with alum and lead than he ever did with the poems in *Constellations of Miranda*?” Something like this allows your fear to point you toward an intellectual problem; it recognizes fear as a kind of scholarly labor. Treat fear as a productive instinct, a preconscious awareness that something interesting lies before you. Spending your time overmastering fear, or ignoring it, and you will lose out on the insights it grants.

Another way to use your fear is to keep it just enough alive to make your writing life interesting. If you set out to write an article or a chapter without knowing exactly what you will conclude, leaving yourself open to learning through the writing process—as I have said, I think this is the better way to write—then you will naturally worry that by essay’s end you will in fact have nothing to say. When I am writing I occasionally encounter this as I come up with, somewhere around the tenth or eleventh page, a really good idea, one with the right size and shape to close out the entire piece. My initial impulse is at that point to keep the idea in reserve, to organize the rest of the essay around it, and to write in full confidence that I will, some ten or fifteen pages later, finish with something to say. But when that happens I make myself write the idea down immediately—right there or page 10 or 11 or wherever I am. If it closes a paragraph or a section, so be it. Doing so forces me to push past this first idea to something better; since the best idea of the essay cannot (for structural reasons) be on the tenth page, I must somehow over the next fifteen pages or so get to an even better or more interesting idea, or manage to put that idea in a

frame that will surround, elevate, or contextualize it in ways that justify asking the reader to read the second half of the piece. If the reader must keep learning, so must I. In this way I am always holding open the ground before me, using the fear of falling to motivate new thought. (I imagine myself driving a train over a cliff, leaning out ahead of the locomotive like a cartoon rabbit, building a bridge just ahead of the wheels' encounter with the open air.)

6. *Start poor, finish rich.* Many books on style will tell you to be concise and avoid jargon. Don't use two words where one will do; replace long words with short ones; trim the fat; make your writing simple and direct. Such books are fond of quoting Blaise Pascal's classic humble-brag, "The present letter is a very long one, simply because I had no leisure to make it shorter" (417). All this counts as decent advice (I'll have more to say about it in chapter 24), but it's wrong about one thing: you should not, and cannot afford to, worry about concision when you are just starting to write.

Think of it like this: it's hard to buy a friend a sandwich when you're feeling poor because you barely have anything yourself. When you're rich on the other hand, it's sandwiches all around. Similarly for writing: the time to worry about concision comes when you can *afford* it. Cutting ten pages from a twenty-page manuscript is a disaster; cutting fifty pages from a 210-page manuscript no big deal. If you cut and prune too early, you'll slow yourself down (and run the risk of not meeting goals), and you'll lose out on the chance that one of your loose or wordy paragraphs will turn out, in hindsight, to contain a crucial new idea.

Psychologically, a dangerous pattern can emerge around cutting, in which it becomes a form of abnegation or self-denial: I'm being really tough on myself by being ruthlessly dismissive of my own work. Like anorexics who know that they hold themselves to standards others don't dare achieve, such writers victimize themselves in the name of values no one else believes in. This is self-punishment in the name being "realistic" (as opposed to all those soft, unrealistic idiots who think their writing is any good, or those fat people who dare to call themselves "thin"), an assault on one's own happiness or sense of self-worth that is compensated for by the feeling of virtuous denial that accompanies it. In the long run, people caught up in this pattern can end up seeing their entire career as a series of failures to live up to their best dreams. Of course this might be

true! Maybe some of your writing is no good; maybe you won't be read in a hundred years. But you are almost certainly *not* the best judge of either your writing or the emotions that come with it. Part of building a good writing practice is recognizing that fact, being suspicious of your emotional states (especially when they hurt you), and recognizing how much of the lying you tell yourself relies on the false production of virtue. The lie that you tell yourself as a form of self-denial will be the hardest to see as a lie. But in reality, the truth—the truth that you can do good work, that you have done it in the past and that you will do so again—is, counter-intuitively, on the side of your *happiness*, not your despair. (Occasionally, when I am caught up in this form of sadness, I will simply list out loud, as a mantra, all of the things I've accomplished that I'm proud of. Those accomplishments are far realer, more actual and in the world, than how I am feeling today, or this week, about my latest piece of writing.)

More pragmatically, when you write without knowing exactly how things will turn out, you will be learning as you write. This kind of writing process turns back on itself, recursively; as you write new pages you will also return to what you have already written, discovering the path it makes and following it forward. It's therefore important not to censor lines of thought in the initial stages, especially when you have so little writing done. Follow your ideas where they take you, then return to what you have written and think about how it hangs together, how it might be structured and organized so as to function as a single, coherent whole. When that happens you will realize that some of your pages no longer fit—that the best path through what you have written does not include every sentence or every section. And that's ok—because at this point you will have lots of pages, you can be generous, even profligate, in your cutting and revision.

7. *Treat revision (and even research) as writing.* Though the advice to finish rich is partly about self-preservation, about freeing you up to write at the beginning of your process, it also highlights the fundamentally recursive nature of learning as you write. As I work, I will pause every once in a while—usually after each subsection, then each section, then each chapter—and work back through what I have written so far. This allows me to conceive of and evaluate what I have done, and to begin to trace a structural outline of the work as a whole. It also helps me identify my

best thoughts. Because I don't censor much in the first draft, my writing will tend to have a number of different ideas, some of which are properly subordinated or connected to one other and others that are outliers. As I reread and revise, locating my best ideas, I start building the structure of the revised section around those concepts—even as I cut, or save for later, some of their subordinated or outlying instances. That structure, which grows throughout the revision, then lays down a potential line of advance for new sentences and new sections.

Revising and rewriting this way allows me to make sure that I am properly managing the relation of various subsections, sections, and chapters of a work—that their order makes sense, that the transitions among them work, and that the reader's experience of reading has good rhythm, pace, and energy. It also means that the closer I get to the close of an article, a chapter, or a book, the more constrained I will be by what has come before, and the more I will know about what my already existing material *needs* to be complete.

I will have more to say about structure, rhythm, pace, and other practical aspects of academic prose later on, but for now I want you to notice that if you write this way, it does not make sense to think of writing and revision as separate processes. Most people educated in the United States will have a sense of revision that covers amending sentence-level errors and occasionally adding or removing material; this is because most of the revision they practice in high school and in college amounts to little more than correcting what the teacher has asked them to fix. When you begin to write like a professor—to write, that is, within the constraints of scholarly ethos and scholarly time—such thinking does you no good and no favors. It inculcates a model of writing in which “revision” happens to a static, preexisting text, rather than one in which the act of revising, like the act of writing, creates the text that the writing becomes. Revision is not something that happens *after* writing. It constitutes the core of the dynamic writing process I am trying to teach.

Some of you may find it helpful to think of research in the same way. I have tended to separate research and writing days, but that does imply, a bit weirdly, that the main work of discovering and learning happens only on the writing days. Everyone who's spent time paging through documents knows that some of your best ideas can come from browsing, reading, or

taking notes. So you may want to develop a habit pattern that includes research as part of the general act of “writing,” in which you have days or goals that recognize the work you’re doing in the archives, or simply reading and taking notes. Giving yourself credit for that labor, integrating it into your goal-making and goal-meeting process, may be a useful way to conceive of yourself as a writer and a scholar. (But be careful: doing research is one of the classic forms of virtuous procrastination.)

8. *Take this advice!* I assume that most readers of this book will not take most of this advice, mainly because I do not take most of the advice I get from books. Nonetheless I wish to assert against the tsunami of indifference and resistance that *you really should try some of this stuff*. I have had students over the years listen carefully and excitedly to a number of these suggestions, and even agree that, for instance, writing for an hour a day would be a good idea. But do they actually go and do it? Usually not. I imagine this happens for two reasons: first, because they don’t quite believe that I myself do these things—they think, perhaps, that these suggestions are for beginners, or for people who somehow don’t have it together; that because their goal is eventually to not need any of this advice, they should start practicing living without it right now. Honestly, this is crazy. When I am writing scholarship, I do everything I describe here, exactly as I describe it. This really is my grown-up, professional writing practice. I’m not just making things up for kids.

The second reason is that following this advice regularly is hard. If it takes two or more months to automate a habit, which means two months of the serious exercise of willpower and discipline, with frequent opportunities to backslide, to get caught in emotional traps, or to have life get in the way. I know that when I have taken a break from writing—in a semester, for instance, where I am teaching new courses—returning to the habits I describe here can be really difficult. On my most recent first day back (after a three-month break), I started with the gum, played Freecell for an hour, wrote for forty-five minutes, and collapsed in exhaustion. It took me a full week to get back to normal. And that’s after fifteen years of relatively continuous practice. So I know how difficult all this can be. The only advice I can give you is to trust yourself enough to try it, and to never let small lapses stop you. Be good to yourself; befriend your anxiety and fear. It does, in the long run, get easier.