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Finding the Motivation, Time, Personal Techniques, and Confidence to Write

Abstract

Extension personnel need to embrace the concept of producing scholarship in written form. However, many often encounter challenges, such as finding time to write and figuring out how to get started. Scheduling writing times during your peak performance periods, using techniques that include goal setting or timed intensive writing, and overcoming your fears about writing can improve your productivity. Take the challenge, and start today.

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Why Write?

Since Boyer wrote *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* in 1990, the debate about scholarship and what it means to universities and public perception of universities has been ongoing. One idea that is emphasized by the "Boyer revolution" and relevant to Extension is the importance of sharing information with colleagues for peer review (Boyer, 1990; Norman, 2001; Smith, 2004). Although Extension, in general, has undervalued and poorly understood the concept of peer review over the years (Olson, Skuza, & Blinn, 2007), most authors suggest that scholarship in Extension includes works that are peer reviewed and shared with colleagues (Culp, 2009; Smith, 2004; Norman, 2001). Smith (2009) adapted the Boyer model of discovery, integration, application, and teaching to include a holistic view of Extension programming that involves issues identification, development and implementation of appropriate educational solutions, and evaluation of effort, and culminates with scholarly sharing for peer review. Even though scholarship is a much broader endeavor in Extension than in other university departments (Adams, Harrell, Maddy, & Weigel, 2005), writing is always the most easily recognizable and respected form of scholarship. Whether it is in the form of a journal article, a fact sheet, a handout, a digital presentation, or social media content, Extension personnel need to embrace written scholarship.

Finding Time to Write and Getting Started

Many Extension professionals seeking to engage in written scholarship are stymied by the interconnected barriers of having little time for writing and not knowing how to begin. Recognizing that no one plan or approach works for everyone, we describe two methods for making time to write and getting started. Try one, both, or a combination of the two to identify a technique that works best for you.

Method 1

In his book *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing*, Silvia (2007) offers practical insight into producing written scholarship and becoming a "reflective, disciplined writer" (p. 3). According to Silvia, the key to writing a lot is allocating time for writing and then sticking to the schedule. The number of hours allocated is not as important as the regularity of the scheduled writing times. He suggests starting with 4 hours a week and placing the same priority on these meetings with yourself as you place on appointments or meetings you schedule with clientele or others.

Silvia (2007) suggests implementing three motivational practices to make scheduled writing times more productive:

1. Establish goals. It is okay to spend a writing session making goals and plans. It is important to set specific goals for each writing project and to set a goal to identify what you want to accomplish at the start of each writing session. Consider setting daily goals, specifically goals related to action, such as, "write 200 words" or "complete abstract for journal article" or "brainstorm and make an outline for proposal due ____" and so forth.
2. Set priorities. Once you know where you are headed (goals), you can decide which project needs attention first. Setting priorities is helpful for preventing stressful last-minute writing and other poor writing habits.
3. Monitor progress. The act of tracking progress can help you feel more accountable, provide a reference point for gauging improvement, and show how long it typically takes to finish a project. At the end of a writing session, check off goals you accomplished as a way of monitoring your progress. You will find that monitoring your progress motivates you to not miss a day and keeps the focus on accomplishing goals.

Method 2

In the late 1980s, entrepreneur Francesco Cirillo developed a method for time management called the Pomodoro Technique. It is based on the idea that recurrent breaks improve mental capacity (Shellenbarger, 2009; Tambini, Ketz, & Davachi, 2010). This technique breaks down work into 25-minute intervals, split up by short breaks.

The Pomodoro Technique can be implemented in five steps:

1. Decide on a task.
2. Set a timer for 25 minutes.
3. Work on the task until the timer rings.
4. Take a 3- to 5-minute break.
5. Repeat; after four intervals, take a 15- to 30-minute break.

Deciding When to Write

In his book *The Art of Learning*, Waitzkin (2007) teaches the importance of performing creative work, such as writing, during peak performance hours, when the mind is fresh. Usually, a person's most creative time occurs after his or her body and mind have rested. For instance, one person might wake early, write for a while, take a 60-minute break to exercise, and then carry out some hard-core writing, using the Pomodoro Technique. Someone else might experience peak performance in the afternoon. Others are most creative at 3:00 a.m. Identifying and then writing during your most creative time allows you to accomplish more effective writing in less time than if you try to write when your body and mind are tired.

Overcoming Emotional Obstacles

Writing is not an equal opportunity talent, and one size does not fit all. Many in Extension find writing to be an excruciating task. However, most people can improve their writing skills by facing their writing fears and forcing themselves to do it. Start by brainstorming topics, choosing one, and getting something down on paper. Use one or both of the techniques described above, with the goal of revising later. Also, learn to welcome critical reviews (Hoelscher, 2006). Recognizing that receiving critical reviews of your writing can be like having your firstborn criticized, we recommend that you "get over it" and learn from those reviews. Do not be offended! A critical review is not about you. Addressing concerns of reviewers makes your writing better and makes you a better writer.

The Challenge

Realize that scholarship can be an outcome of any program. Plan for scholarship, and make it happen!

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