

Academic Writing as a Bodily Experience

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“Writing offers the chance to cultivate an attentiveness to life itself,
and to enhance perceptions with the precision of words.”

— *Alive in the Writing*, Narayan (2012: xi)

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Screenshot from my Twitter account, 11 September 2020

<https://twitter.com/BerLinguistin/status/1304469752102952967>

*This material has been produced for an **experimental** workshop on academic writing organized by Marta Cenedese, Jérémie Poiroux and Aube Richebourg at the Centre Marc Bloch, a French-German interdisciplinary research center for the humanities and social sciences on 12-13 October 2020. Feedback and resources welcome! I would also be very honored if you want to share your experience with me.*

Important: This two-hour workshop is about getting to know yourself as a writer (that you already are). I recognize that material conditions such as precariousness, job stress, uncertainties, family issues, health conditions (including mental health), the neoliberal constraints of our current academic labor market greatly impact the writing process. I cannot cover these aspects here, and I hope that you'll still want to embark on this journey with me.

If you're rather a Twitter person and/or like GIFs, here is a summary:

<https://twitter.com/BerLinguistin/status/1315739404485394434>

This is a slightly revised version of the material from 14 October 2020 (a few typos have been corrected and I have described the screenshots in order to make the material more inclusive).

1. Writing: A Beginning

For the next ten minutes, **write what writing means to you**. Write it in any language(s) that feel(s) natural to you at the moment.

(Please don't talk to anyone. If you need to leave the room, it's fine. If you don't have anything to write, that's fine, too. Then, don't write. Or, write that you don't want to write. Or doodle. Or just wait for it to be over.)

2. Allowing Yourself to Feel

Blog post: <https://icietla.hypotheses.org/1556>

So, how are you doing?

Are you okay?

- Yes, why wouldn't I be?
- You mean, am I okay with my writing or in general, like in my life?
- I don't know.
- No, I don't feel so good today.

Did you write?

- Well, we had to, right? So yes, I wrote *something*.
 - But it feels hard/wrong for me to actually answer "yes".
 - Do you feel that in order for you to be able to say "I wrote", it would need to be...
 - more?
 - more substantial?
 - more structured?
- No, I didn't.
 - I didn't write anything *at all*.
 - Well, I did write a few things, but this is not *really* writing, so...

Did you notice it when I put music on?

- Oh my God, there was music?!
- Yes, I noticed it...
 - and it totally distracted me
 - and I really enjoyed it
 - and _____ [describe it in your own words]

Do you feel that these questions are irrelevant to your writing?

- Yes ("Academic writing is/should be (addressed as) a purely intellectual matter")
- Mmh, I'm not sure ("I want to know more but I'm not super convinced")
- Oh, no, these questions definitely resonate with me ("Tell me more!")

And yet... there could be a lot more, such as:

- How did you sleep this night?
- How does it feel to be in a room with other people?
- Do you like that chair?

- Did you arrive just on time, too early, too late?
- Did you drink enough/too much coffee/tea/water/juice this morning?
- What language(s) did you speak, hear, read prior to the workshop?
- _____

Finally, let's get a grasp at what how you could have interpreted the question—what writing means to you:

- How do you feel about writing?
- How do you describe the process of writing?
- What is your relationship to writing?
- _____

Partner exercise (in speaking, not in writing, but I mean, feel free to write if you want to):

What counts as writing to you? Get to know your resistances, biases, and expectations.

The question is not as innocuous as it seems. For instance, for a long time, writing and reading were two very different, and very independent activities to me. I had reading days (those days when I needed to take it slow) and writing days when I was able to focus and *produce something*. It is only when I completely [changed my readings habits](#) and began annotating literature on my tablet that I also began seeing reading as an essential part of writing: Because I [read with a specific goal in mind](#), I [never read a paper from A to B](#) but most importantly, I read a paper for a specific paragraph of a text I am currently writing¹. Concretely, this means that **I see reading as inherently writing, too**, and integrate notes from my readings directly into my texts. Then, I reformulate, cut citations, etc.

The materiality of writing

Oh, yes, I could begin by defining what the materiality of writing is—why speaking and writing are “material practices”: “how they are physically produced and apprehended, what material objects they produce, and what can be their characteristic durations and effects”. “*Writing* is multiply engaged in materiality, because it too is a physical activity of the body, requiring implements and surfaces and usually resulting in some graphic artifact that embodies a text.” (Irvine 2017: 281-282)

It would probably reassure the intellectual in you who may be freaking out about this workshop. But let's be honest: we all have an idea of what I mean by ‘materiality’, and it doesn't have to be contrasted

¹ Of course, I also read *a lot* apart from papers I'm writing: for classes, to follow up on the literature in my field and in the humanities and social sciences in general, for fun, etc. I never read at my desk, however, but mostly in between spaces, which is why, to me, *this* reading experience is connected to writing. But this is a story for another blog post.

with ‘the digital world’. So, no, ‘materiality’ does not only mean paper. But it *also* means paper. How often do you write on paper, by the way?

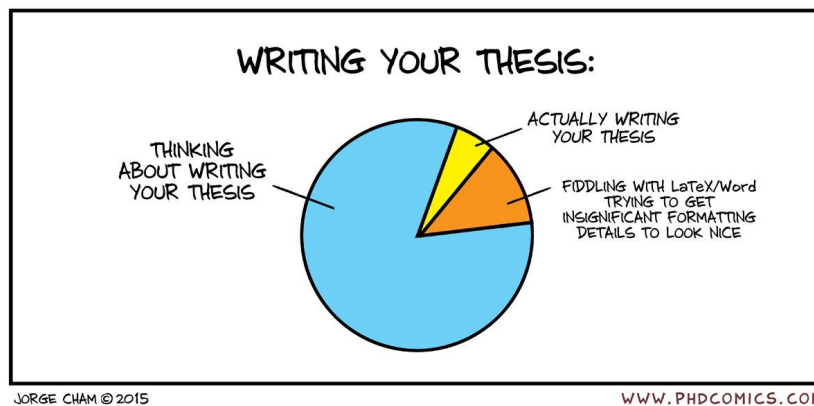
The aesthetics of writing

Before going through *what* you wrote, ask yourself **how you wrote**:

- on a piece of paper, and if so
 - on a notebook that is special to you or that you’re using specifically for your research
 - on a random piece of paper that you might throw away right after the workshop
 - with a pen, or even several pens from different colors that you really like
 - with the first pen that you could find
 - with a pen that someone lent you (because you never carry a pen with you)
- on your laptop, and if so
 - in a new document that you opened for the workshop
 - this document already has a name
 - with a specific font, which is the one you feel comfortable with
 - with the font that was automatically inserted
- on your tablet or your smartphone

→ These questions may help you figure out **whether aesthetics plays a part in your writing**.

I keep reading that you should just put words on (digital) paper, no matter how they look like, and by that I don’t mean if they are the right words, but with no headings, no italics, no matter in which font. I strongly disagree. **I cannot think properly if the document does not look nice.**



It may be perceived as a form of procrastination but for me, it is actually an **active preparation for writing**: it feels like I have begun already, gives me a structure, a section to look forward to, etc.

It may not be the case for you, and it is totally fine. Or you may have done this only to kill some time, and this is fine, too, because it enables you to see **how you react when facing an apparently simple**

writing exercise, and what strategies you put in place to avoid writing. Once you've identified them, you can also counter them.

On the other hand, if you have already identified that in the first ten minutes of this exercise, you **needed** to write on a notebook you like, or in a font that is aesthetically pleasing to you, **this is a first step towards recognizing what works for you—help you be in the writing mode.**

(De)structuring writing

And then, *what* did you write, not in terms of content, but...

- were there words?
- sentences?
- paragraphs?

And **how does it look like** on your page?

- did you capitalize anything?
- did you underline anything?
- did you italicize anything?
- did you draw anything?
- did you make connections, for instance with arrows?
- did you delete a lot (on a laptop), or made any words look unrecognizable (on paper)?

→ These questions may help you understand **whether you need to see a structure** while writing, or **whether you rather write as it comes.**

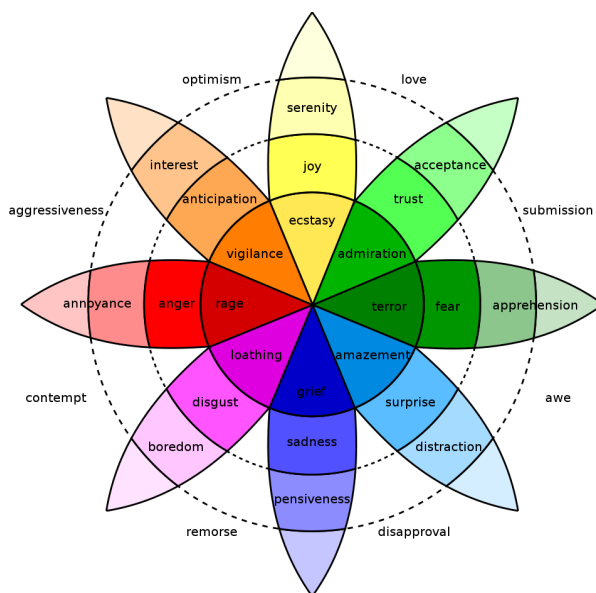
This is important, as it will give you insights into whether you need to write the introduction first or not (see [below](#)), and whether you need a (fine-grained) structure *before* turning your thoughts into words. Here again, it may be a valuable piece of advice when you're stuck to say that you should just write *anything*, no matter in which order. If you have not highlighted anything and if you have written in a linear mode, writing may mean throwing ideas onto the page, and figuring out what to do with them afterwards.

For me, it has never worked. **If I cannot write, it is because I haven't processed where to begin and where to end.** What happens in the middle is always a mystery, but I need to know where it starts and how I want to conclude, which is also why I always write the abstract first (for a paper). I will end up rewriting it, of course, but this is my starting point. I also begin with the introduction, an outline, and then I feel up the blanks.

Writing with your body, writing as a body

During that process, you *felt*...

- impatient
- energized
- stressed
- happy
- bored
- lost
- hungry
- tired
- ... or anything on this figure?
- or anything else?



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→ These questions allow you to examine **the possible inputs you may get before or while writing**. They *do* matter, and to be honest, I'm not sure I need to develop this point, as I am preparing this material in the middle of a pandemic.

Still, ask yourself: how focused are you when you are... falling in love? mad at one of your close friends, siblings, or partner(s)? worried about your relatives? anxious about your future? overexcited because of

a new skill/hobby/project you didn't know you enjoyed? trying to get out of an abusive relationship? unsure how to pay your rent next month? etc.

I have listed both really nice and really difficult thoughts and feelings because both play a role. Being happy or excited does not automatically mean you'll feel more confident and more apt at writing, as it can be overwhelming, too. Similarly, being sad or angry does not mean that you'll be incapable to write. You may find comfort in being by yourself to process your thoughts in challenging times.

What does it bring, then, you may ask, to just know how you feel?

First, it may be a relief to just acknowledge what's going on. When I allow myself to say that I'm lost, confused, impatient, etc., I become able to *not* write (academically!), because I **decide to honor that some feelings, thoughts, and emotions are more central right now**. It may mean not writing for a couple of hours/days/weeks/months (!) (hello 2020), or not writing a paper that may trigger me (i.e. avoiding certain projects for a given time, for instance because writing on gender, multilingualism, in my first language, or anything else is too much right now). All of that *is* okay.

Second, you may then be able to develop strategies relating to particular emotions. Being sad or overexcited does not feel the same in your body, and may (should?) not be connected to the same response regarding your writing.



Screenshot from my Twitter account, 22 September 2020
<https://twitter.com/BerLinguistin/status/1308335001935785984>

I'm happy to discuss with you what works for me (when I'm overexcited I just dance it out like crazy in my living room on some bad music because I need to exhaust myself), but since **the whole point of**

this workshop is to help you find out what actually works for you, I don't want it to take too much space. For more resources, I found [this thread](#) amazing.

Writing as a reaction to an external stimulus

Delving further, whether you could write or not...

- ❑ you found the writing exercise **too unspecific**, “I mean, how can we say anything about what *X means* if we have not *defined* what *X is* before?!”

→ Then you **may be someone who needs to have figured out the (very narrow and concrete) concepts you need before writing**. It seems like common sense—of course you have to do a proper literature review and define the concepts you're using. Do you need to begin with this part, though?

I don't. (After having structured my paper and written the abstract, see above) **I usually begin with a qualitative example that really talks to me because it gets me into something concrete that reminds me of why I love what I do**. The concept(s) usually ‘pop up’ in this first round of analysis, and I then feel legitimate to develop the theoretical framework because I have something tangible to rely on.

- ❑ you found the writing exercise **too personal**, “I mean, why should I be saying what writing means to *me*, aren't there any (great, senior) academics who have already said it (better)?!”

→ Have you ever heard of the **imposter syndrome**? It is different not to write because you know you that need more time, or more readings, or not to write because you think what you have to say is less important than what others have already said or will ever say.

An idea to develop your confidence is to write a lot, but not only academically (and not necessarily every day, but [I'll come back to this](#)). To just write: journaling, poetry, thoughts, maybe a short story on Instagram or a long WhatsApp message. **When you develop this habit of writing and communicating about your needs, you also become more aware of what *not* writing means**. For me, when something is off, I ‘disappear’. I stop replying to messages, I purposely ignore people asking how I am doing, and I eat a lot of sugar. I begin to doubt everything. Specifically, I convince myself that I have nothing to say. And I stop writing. In these cases, I have to actually force myself to write, and give myself (very) strict deadlines (with accountability buddies).

But sometimes as well, I stop writing because I actually need a break. I feel intellectually challenged, don't know where to begin, and I'm not sure whether I have anything to contribute. This is stressful, but it is by no means the same feeling as when my imposter syndrome kicks in.

I have learned to make the difference. Sometimes, when I am too agitated, I cannot write, because *I know*, profoundly, that it is not the right time. Then I wait. Weeks if I need to. Yes, I have already spent

weeks not writing. Or, rather, not writing anything *academic*. I know it will come back, which is why I let it be.

❑ you found the writing exercise **too quick**, “I’m happy to give it a try, but ten minutes?!”

→ Then you may be someone who needs **some time to ease into writing**, or some preparation.

I am like this, which is why **the Pomodoro technique** (setting a timer for, say, 25 minutes, and shutting down any distraction) **has never worked for me**. I usually need more than 25 minutes to actually *begin* academic writing, but I do a lot of writing before. Similarly, **when I’m on a timer, I feel urged to write**, which puts me into stress mode: “Write, but now! Be quick, hurry up!” and I almost get a panic attack.

Before delving into the next section I want to invite you pay attention to what’s happening to you, inside you, after these first inputs:

What’s going on in your body now? Sit back now and move your gaze to something external like the view out the window. Allow your shoulders to drop and the body to be as comfortable and relaxed as it can be at the moment. As you [heard me talk about feelings, emotions, colors], how has your body reacted to [these inputs]? **Have you felt a slight quickening of the breath and alertness of posture as some ideas and sentences ‘hit home’ or resonate with your own experience?** Alternatively, which [suggestions] have been met with a numbing of bodily response—perhaps as others work is referenced and our writing has obeyed conventional academic norms? Tune into what your body might be telling you about your appetite for the next section. (adapted from Sinclair & Ladkin 2018: 419, citing Gallop 1995)

3. Debunking Some Myths

Blog post: <https://icietla.hypotheses.org/1561>

Here are some tips about academic writing that I have been trying to apply for years, and have made me feel guilty and powerless because they did not work for me. Please read this section exactly the way you should always read any ((academic) writing) tip: this is food for thought, not a recipe that will work for you no matter what. Conversely, I am also definitely not saying that these tips are not helpful, or that you should not apply them. Rather, all I’m saying is that these tips do not work *for me*, and that they seemed so general and easy to apply that I really struggled: **Why would I be the only one for whom these tips didn’t work?**

“Write every day.”

What it means

Well, this one is pretty obvious. Related: “Write XXX words per day.” or “Write XXX minutes/hours per day.”

Why it does not work for me

I think none other piece of advice has undermined my self-confidence as much as this one. I get the rationale behind it: deromanticize writing, don’t wait for inspiration, make it a daily habit you won’t even question, make it an inherent part of your job, etc. And still.

Mondays do not feel the same as Wednesdays, there is at least one day every month when menstruation pain prevents me from writing, and in between, you know, life happens.

I came to understand that I have to write when I have something to say. And sometimes, I do not (yet) have something to say. I can (now) trust myself to know that if it’s not today, it’s not today, and maybe not any other day this week.

I know the difference between “I don’t have anything to say because I’m processing new, unorganized thoughts and I’m not ready” and “I’m finding myself excuses not to write—but why?”.

Also, sometimes, and in 2020 more often than not, **I feel totally fine *not* to write when the/my world is falling apart.** After a while, I am getting impatient and nervous and know I have to get back to it.

You may have never felt like this, and feel that you *need* to write every day (or at least very regularly) in order not to ‘forget’ how it goes. It may be the case. **But have you *ever* tried not writing, and waiting for it to come back? Not necessarily the urge to *write*, but the one to *say something*?** Oh, and while *not* writing, not beating yourself up for not doing it, but trusting yourself and letting yourself be, and knowing that a lot of things are happening in the background in the meantime?

“Eat that frog.”

What it means

The concept comes from a bestseller, *Eat That Frog! 21 Great Ways to Stop Procrastinating and Get More Done in Less Time*, by Brian Tracy (2017: xii), and relies on that simple idea: **“start with the biggest, hardest, and most important task first”**—the “ugliest frog”.

Applied to academic writing, which is seen as (one of) our biggest, hardest, and most important task(s), it means that you should begin with writing. The expected rewards is that you train your brain into a

new habit, become more confident, and—well, this is the goal—finally get to write this paper/book/grant/application.

Why it does not work for me

As Aisha Ahmad [says](#), “For me, I need to ease into heavy-duty academic writing.” Almost every day, no matter how early I woke up, how energized I am, **I need some time** (up to one hour, but I never time it) **to put myself into writing mode**. I rename a few files, [organize my Zotero database](#), drink two coffees, read a few sentences from others to inhabit a world of writing in the language I’ll be writing in for the next hour. (Why multilingual writing practices never get accounted for when talking about (academic) writing, oh, don’t get me started.)

Then, I’m ready.

It took me seven years (!) to understand that **this preparation phase is not procrastination, but the time I need to process the mere idea of writing**.

Moreover, **I cannot write if I know that I have multiple small things to go through**. Of course, learning to prioritize your writing and to shut down this little voice in your head is key—emails can wait. Still, on some days it’s easier for me to *begin with emails* (and then even put a timer!) because it gives me a good feeling about myself (I hate letting people wait): **I’ve achieved quite a lot in a limited amount of time**.

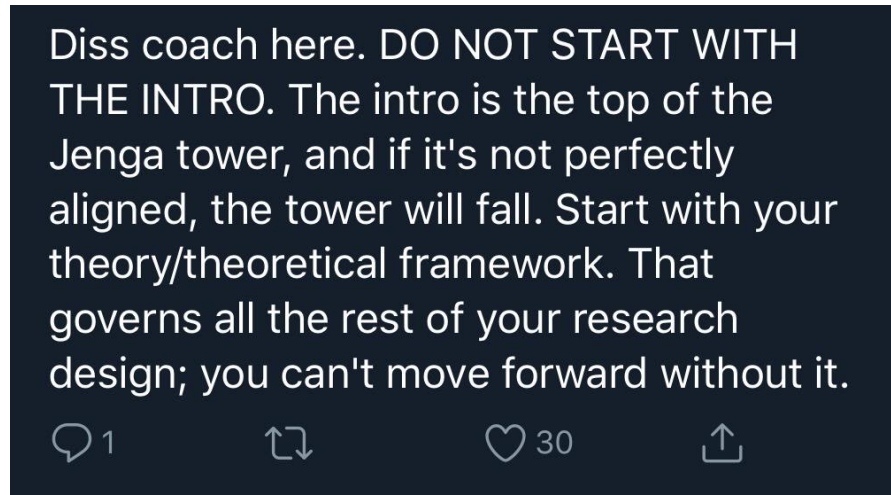
Then, I can write. Then, I *must* write, because I’ve given others the time they needed, so now it’s my turn.

By the way, isn’t it **contradictory to pretend, on the one hand, that writing is just like any other task** that you should just integrate into your daily routine (“Write every day?”) **and, at the same time, to say that this is something so important and so big that it has to be your frog, your ugliest frog, the thing you begin with every day?!**

On a side note, I also think that conceptualizing writing as the “ugliest frog” *per se*, without even questioning it, is problematic: **on some days, writing doesn’t feel hard at all**. Grading does, almost every time. On some days, *calling* (hi millennials!) someone from the administration to be reimbursed is the small thing I’m avoiding. On some days, writing is my easy task.

Because I’ve stopped beating myself up when I cannot write, I can also really enjoy these other days when writing feels obvious, and have been able to put up a small list of external factors that make it happen: HIIT or cardio training first thing in the morning, very light dinner on the day before, having already plans for the evening, but nothing too special or too fancy.

“Do not start with the introduction.”



Screenshot from a thread on academic writing, 1 October 2020

[The screenshot/tweet reads: “Diss coach here. DO NOT START WITH THE INTRO. The intro is the top of the Jenga tower, and if it’s not perfectly aligned, the tower will fall. Start with your theory/theoretical framework. That governs all the rest of your research design; you can’t move forward without it.”]

What it means

This one is pretty straightforward as well. It means that you should not begin with the introduction, as this part of your work requires a clear vision that you get only at the end of your writing.

Why it does not work for me

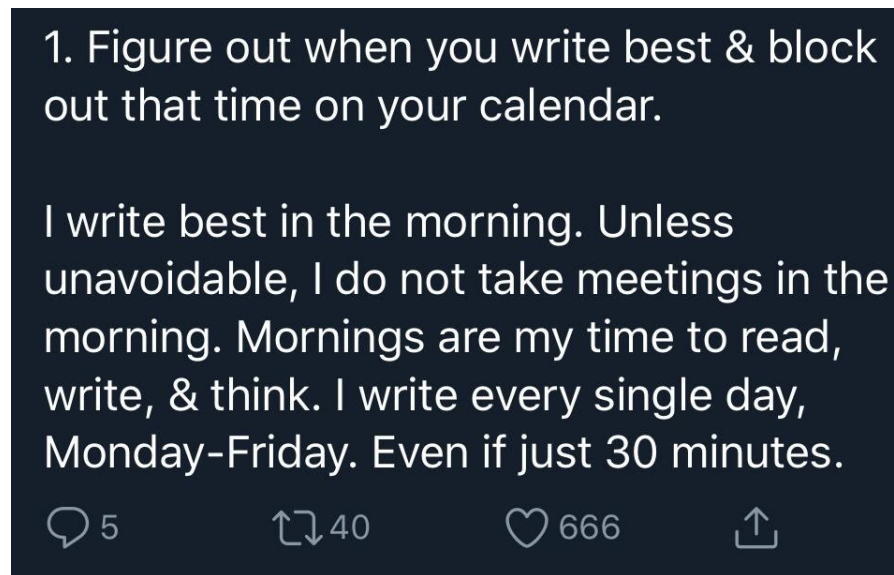
A more appropriate way to phrase this could be: **“If you start with the introduction, be prepared to rewrite it.”** On some very special occasions, I am able to begin writing out of the blue—the methodology, the theoretical framework, the empirical part. But more often than not, [I need my central argument and my structure to get started](#)—**all those things that actually happen in the introduction.**

What I like about introductions as well, is that they have to engage the reader by presenting an anecdote, a new way of thinking, a random fact no one had observed before... and writing this helps me connect to *why* this piece of writing means something to me, and why I’m excited about it. So I *do* begin with introductions.

I don’t want to develop this argument because not starting with the introduction can be a useful piece of advice (I keep seeing it all over again). What strikes me is rather **the general, absolutist tone of this piece of advice**—and this is how most tips on academic writing (and on how to become a ‘productive’ academic writer, huh) are framed.

In this workshop, **I'm not giving you any general tips**—and this may be very frustrating. My hope is that you'll learn how to find what works for you by delving into yourself, and that we can collaboratively develop a pool of tips to go through when we need to renew our methods. Of course, this is harder and less popular—talking about our feelings can make us incredibly uncomfortable, and there is no ready-to-go solution. Still, in the long run, it's worth it. In fact, this might even be the only way.

“Find your tiger time.”



Screenshot from a thread on academic writing, 15 September 2020

[The screenshot/tweet reads: “Figure out when you write best & block out that time on your calendar. I write best in the morning. Unless unavoidable, I do not take meetings in the morning. Mornings are my time to read, write, & think. I write every single day, Monday-Friday. Even if just 30 minutes.”]

What it means

The idea is that we all have a time during which we are more creative and more able to concentrate. Figure out when that time is. Then, avoid making appointments at that time and integrate these writing blocks into your daily routine—no emails, no department meetings, no grading at that time. Make writing during your tiger time a priority.

Why it does not work for me

Because **I don't have any tiger time**. Literally. I am rather an early bird and enjoy waking up between 6 and 7:30 am. Then, I am usually in a good mood and ready to write during the day, usually before 5 pm. Still, as you can imagine, I am not writing 9 hours a day, and there is great variation there.

So, when do I write? When do I commit to writing? I don't have any precise schedule on a daily basis. (I am fine and still achieve quite much, thank you.) I have monthly plans, sometimes divided into weeks (sometimes!).

This mental flexibility does marvels for me (although I totally get that it may not for people who need routine or are prone to anxiety, for instance): **I write project-based and not “just to write”**. Similarly, in my journal, I can spend weeks not writing and then write several times a day.

Hot take: a very common (and surely useful) piece of advice is to break your work down into SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely) goals. I've never been able to do this, because **figuring out all the small steps leading to the final piece just depresses me; there are too many of them**. I'd rather begin, no matter how, and go from there. This one won't probably convince you, but that how I feel, and here again, central to my writing experience was just accepting that it's how I work.

When I come back to writing after a long period of absence, **I reflect on why I am writing now**: did it feel long? Was I avoiding something? Why do I feel ready now? What has changed? What have I read, analyzed, understood in the meantime that makes it possible to be writing now?

I am not doing this every time, but every time I want to come back to a project after a while. It helps me recenter on why—**why does this project matter to me?** When I come back to the inner purpose, writing may still feel like a big hill, but at least it feels like the struggle is worth it.

Embracing the messy

For a long time, I have felt guilty and, sometimes, even ashamed, not to be able to make some of these easy tips work.

It is only once I have accepted and embraced the messy, emotional, scary part of my writing that I've been able to reconnect to why (my) writing matters. Finding your way through this is what I address in the last section.

4. Finding Your Way

Blog post: <https://icietla.hypotheses.org/1559>

Full disclaimer: I am just another random researcher. I don't have any special writing skills. So, why I am leading this workshop on academic writing, actually?

I just really, really enjoy writing. I have found my way. And, also, I love human beings. I believe that how we feel, what we are, what we become, what we grow into, is more essential than 'being productive (writers)' in a capitalist world. **I believe that not everything we have to share with the world may be communicated with words, and in academic sentences maybe even less so**. I want us to feel valued and heard even when we cannot write, I want us to find ways to say what we have to

say in any form that works for us, and I want us to feel empowered and creative when we write *and* don't write.

Oh, and **I want feelings, experiences, fears and body reactions to finally become part of our research:**

“My research was messy, it was emotional and it was not an easily divisible and logical process. So, I decided that I wanted the writing of my thesis to reflect what I felt was the nature of my research: messy, confrontational, emotional and violent. I wanted to write my thesis differently.” (Weatherall 2019: 101)

How, then, can we go through the “messy, confrontational, emotional and violent” aspects of our research? What resources can we develop to fully embrace those things we don't understand, are afraid of, protect ourselves from?

Writing, not (only) academically

When I have been invited to give a workshop on academic writing, the first thing I knew is that I wanted to talk about **writing in general, not academic writing specifically**. Why? Because I feel that by always talking about academic writing as if it were—inherently, profoundly, automatically—different from other forms of writing, we just want to reassure ourselves by constructing our academic selves as professional writers.

Rather, I would like to invite you to **consider academic writing as one of the many forms writing can take**. We *do* write, every day: SMS, emails, to do-lists, etc.

When I'm stuck, **I shift my (academic) writing to other platforms**. This may sound weird, but sometimes, I'll just describe my next paper in my family WhatsApp chat... and go from there. Or I'll do some journaling, write a blog post. I don't think “this is my next book”, but “I'm going to make some notes on the topic”. And the “notes” gradually become more text.

Being a body (and doing something with it)

“What does it mean to write ‘through the body’? **How does the materiality of your body, your perceptions and responses, affect who you are as a writer, what is important for you to write about and how you go about writing?** And how can you bring more of your embodied knowing—your hunches and gut feel, your tastes and senses—to your research, writing it in ways that are vivid and enlivening for you and your readers?” (Sinclair & Ladkin 2018: 415)

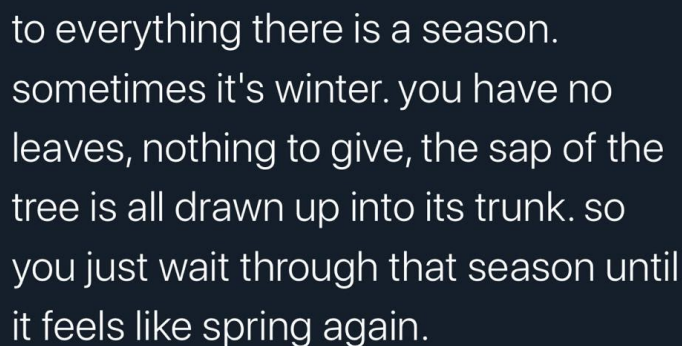
My only advice (and I know this may be frustrating to some of you, but this really is the key): **you have to find what works for you**. And the only way to do it is to listen to yourself.

What works for me (and that I didn't know about) is: dancing, a lot, close to exhaustion, waiting, a lot, too, writing with a pen and colors and stickers, *not* eating (when I'm hungry it weirdly motivates me to write quickly), working in cafés with a lot of people around because it makes me feel like I belong, writing about anything but my next paper, dressing up (and sending cute selfies to my mom—I know right), especially when working from home, doing some pseudo artsy collages, numbering my notebooks (I'm very visual and actually remember in which notebook I had which thought, hence the pen question [in this blog post](#))... **When I'm doing all that (even in the middle of the day), I'm not procrastinating. I'm allowing my brain to focus on something else before coming back.**

When I'm baking or cleaning, on the other hand, I *am* procrastinating. Here again: knowing the difference is key.

And—now comes the scary part—it **may change over time**. So, more specifically, **you have to find what works for you at a given time**.

This has been extremely confusing for me at first, but I have writing cycles that may last a few days, a few weeks, or a few months. They are usually not topic-related but seasonal, which means that I have to **pay full attention to my physical reactions and emotions**.



to everything there is a season.
sometimes it's winter. you have no
leaves, nothing to give, the sap of the
tree is all drawn up into its trunk. so
you just wait through that season until
it feels like spring again.

16:36 · 01/10/2020 · [Twitter Web App](#)

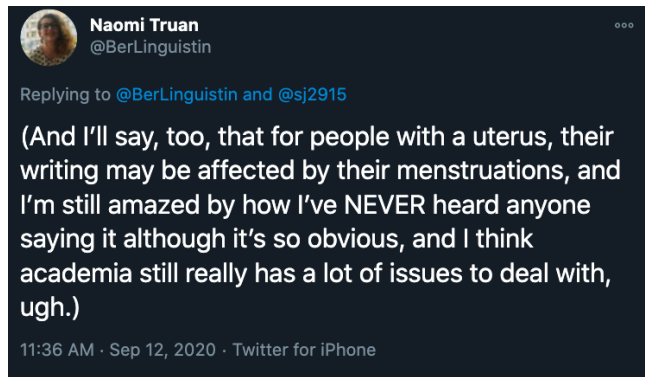
1 Retweet 1 Quote Tweet 11 Likes

Screenshot from a thread on academic writing, 1 October 2020

[The screenshot/tweet reads: “to everything there is a season. sometimes it’s winter. you have no leaves, nothing to give, the sap of the tree is all drawn up into its trunk. so you just wait through that season until it feels like spring again.”]

Concretely, this means that I never wake up at the same time (I'm an early bird, so I'll usually be out of bed before 8 am, and the earliest would be 6 am. Still, a lot of variation there), never eat at the same time, and—you got it—never write at the same time ([see the section on “tiger time”](#)).

For people with a uterus, **writing may be affected by the menstruation**. By that, I do not only mean that there might be days when the pain may prevent you from writing, but that there might also be times of your cycle where you feel overconfident in your ability to put things into words, and others where everything is chaotic. (If it resonates with you and want me to write a blog post on this specifically, please reach out!)



Screenshot from my Twitter account, 12 September 2020
<https://twitter.com/BerLinguistin/status/1304715416158306304>

Going meta: writing on writing

In her book, *Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics*, Jensen (2017: 78) talks about the necessity to write on things that matter to us, and suggests talking to colleagues about your writing projects to find out if you truly enjoy them, because “almost everyone’s voice gets more energetic or musical when they are describing something that engages them”:

So when you find yourself bored, stalled, and discouraged in your writing, **talk with colleagues who can help you find your lilt**. It’s fine— maybe even better— if they don’t know your research area. This means they will be able to stay focused on the tone, not the content, of what you are saying. **Talk to them about what first drew you to the field, or what matters most to you about your research area, or what you hope to accomplish with your current choice of possible projects. Let them listen for the lilt so they can help you identify what matters to you.** Then do the same for them. (Jensen 2017: 81)

This technique does miracle for me, not only to find out whether I am still connected to a project but to organize my thoughts. The danger, however, is that if the colleague raises some scepticism right away or starts pointing at problems with the idea, you might end up dropping that idea prematurely.

That’s why you don’t necessarily need someone listening to you: you can also speak to yourself for a few minutes in front of a mirror, leave yourself an audio note, or... write.

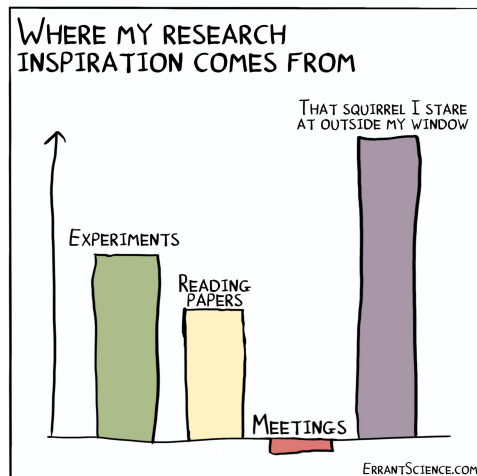
It felt weird at first, but **I keep coming back to writing about how a writing project makes me feel.** Why?

First, it makes me write! When I'm getting obsessed about whether I'm writing or not, it grounds me back, shows me I *can* write, I *do* have things to say. This is especially useful when I have to get back to writing in one of the languages I haven't been using lately.

Second, it helps me process my possible resistances and frustrations. I begin with "I don't feel like writing because..." and go from there.

The power of letting go

There is a story behind it. A grant I got after a first rejection because I let the project soak in for a year, and came back to it when it felt right. But I don't feel like writing anymore, and I want to acknowledge that I don't know how to tell you this story. So, this how I conclude:



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Resources

For some exercises on how to engage with your body while writing, check Sinclair & Ladkin (2018), who mention freefall writing, stream of consciousness writing, ‘sketchbooks’ and journaling, moving, stretching, walking.

Narayan (2012) also offers some great ideas:

- Beginning with the words “I most hope to write...” write forward for at least 5 minutes.
- Quickly write down a few images that jump out at you as you think of the materials you’re drawing on for this undertaking. Continue for at least 5 minutes.
- Beginning with the words “I’d most want to read...” write for at least 2 minutes.

On **Twitter**, follow and/or tag the following accounts and/or hashtags when you have a question:

- [@happyresearchers](https://twitter.com/happyresearchers)
- [@AcademicChatter](https://twitter.com/AcademicChatter)
- [@PhDVoice](https://twitter.com/PhDVoice)
- [@OpenAcademics](https://twitter.com/OpenAcademics)
- #phdchat
- #AcademicTwitter

Please send me your recommendations, too! And check this [list of free/low cost resources for graduate students](#) (rather US-oriented).

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