Learning the Craft of Academic Writing

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LEARNING THE CRAFT OF ACADEMIC WRITING

John Forester

Part 1 of this chapter examines my attempts to learn to write in, and after, graduate school. Part 2 presents a series of cautions and suggestions, lessons I never expected to learn.

Trying to learn to write

Every day I sat at the Underwood manual typewriter I used, and after eighteen months I had made no discernible progress on my dissertation. I’d been in the doctoral programme in City and Regional Planning at UC Berkeley for several years of coursework, exams, and now writing, and I was not pleased. Then affairs of the heart took me away from the writing for a few months. At last, having lost all patience as well as guidance from any faculty, I sat down desperately to do nothing each day but write.

My dissertation

I began with the second chapter because I thought I could write that. I produced thirty pages of six sections so thin that they each needed real work. For the next six months I wrote, and that second chapter became my dissertation. It included much of what I’d abstractly envisioned and roughly outlined, but in a wholly different order and emphasis than I’d outlined time and time again. I felt sick about the product. Only when I looked at it for the first time again, five full years later at Cornell, was I surprised to find that only one chapter was really pretty embarrassing. The writing experience had not been a good one. If the dissertation was anything like downing too many stiff drinks for medicinal purposes, the writing experience persisted as an enormous hangover. At best, having my dissertation done meant that I was free to do further work; at worst, the prospects of further writing were bewildering, almost nauseating.

I had known to talk to people, but it hadn’t helped. I groped along, writing each day. Here and there were signs that someone knew what was going on. One day my wife-to-be returned from a party at the School of Public Health in Berkeley, where she’d been working. She told me that one of the Public Health faculty had asked about me. She said, “When I told him that you were writing your dissertation, he asked, ‘Is he at the three-year-old or the six-year-old stage yet?’” I had a friend doing doctoral work in planning at Berkeley after he’d spent five years at the
National Institute for Mental Health. He once called his dissertation writing “the most infantilizing experience of my life.” Now I knew what he meant, but I didn’t have a clue what to do about it. Still, one friend, Shimon, did help enormously, and I have more to say about him ahead.

As I was three quarters of the way along, with six rough chapters in hand but no clear sense of coherent conclusion, I was asked by one of my Berkeley professors, Jack Dyckman, to cover for him in his Planning Theory class while he had to be out of town. He’d assigned Habermas’s *Legitimation crisis*, a book that we’d read together in a discussion group the year before (Habermas 1975). As I started to prepare for the class, I started writing: Habermas’s strategy of analysis, not any particular argument, suggested a possible solution to the problem of concluding my dissertation. I had been stumped. But here came thirty pages from my typewriter a few days before that class – and those pages became the guts of the last two chapters of my dissertation.

More had happened too: finishing my dissertation, for the first time I had an insight into what Habermas was actually trying to do. I had read several of his books and essays, but they hadn’t figured into my dissertation at all – until the very end. Now many pieces promised to fit together – not least into a hunch about how to use this abstract and ambitious work empirically in research assessing planning practice. No one had done that.

So I had survived the dissertation.² Hardly emerging unscathed, I nevertheless glimpsed the outline of a potentially large research programme I might explore – if the opportunity and skill were available. I was lucky, at least, to have had the opportunity.

**Writing and teaching**

At UC Santa Cruz, a year of part-time teaching and full-time searching for an academic job fuelled the fire for me to write. The kindling had been lit. Since my dissertation had been unconventional to say the least, I knew I had to write. In Berkeley, another of my professors had been candid: “With what you’re doing, you have to write it clearly and get it out, or you can just forget it.” In Santa Cruz, I had said to a friend, obsessively and melodramatically, “Writing is like climbing a ladder out of hell.” She raised a dubious eyebrow. The problem was that I was serious: I was writing and writing, waiting for journal editors to respond, hoping to publish. But then came the good fortune of coming to Cornell. My new colleagues expected me now to teach and to write. But how was I to do that?

The experience of my dissertation did little for my confidence – the serendipity of Jack Dyckman’s having assigned Habermas and asking me to fill in for him notwithstanding. In Berkeley, true to form, my friend Shimon agreed with me only about how little I knew – though now I would learn to write, in particular by sending him “just one simple fifteen page paper,” “that gets it clear,” “that just says what you really want to say.” That proved very difficult to do – so difficult that even six years later, Shimon was still asking for that paper, though he’d shredded and edited virtually everything else I’d written in the meantime.

I did have to write, but I felt ill prepared to do it. I’d learned a lot in graduate school from my professors, but not how to write in any sustained way. My advisor insisted upon clarity and chastised my constant hyphenations; so I came to split sentences with dashes instead of linking words with hyphens – was that progress? The Berkeley faculty’s own writing varied enormously, of course, and though in the slow moments of my dissertation I sought advice, the idiosyncratic anecdotes I heard didn’t seem ultimately to do much for me. How could they? One prolific sociologist wrote on different projects in different places and at different times. Another distinguished sociologist told me something about trying to write ten pages a day, but I was too stunned to ask, “Ten?!” A planning professor had fifteen projects in the pipeline at any given
time, and out came whatever he needed to respond to outside demands as they came along. But how, I wondered, did he write his books? If I was prepared to write or knew anything about it, I was the last one to know it.

I had read C. Wright Mills’s wonderful essay “On intellectual craftsmanship” and reread it too (Mills 1959). Yes, I too found new things when I reorganized my files; I found too much. Even so, this appendix to *The sociological imagination* was the only thing I’d read that seemed to speak to the writing problems I faced. Another dissertation survivor had given me the writing chapter of Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff’s *The modern researcher* (1970). How right their stress on rewriting seemed, but what did I know about rewriting when I wondered what I’d ever have to rewrite? I was ready to rewrite, but a step was missing: the writing, what I’d now call the drafting, laying it out or, even as I say to others at times, the “thinking with your fingers.”

Many years later I found political science professor Aaron Wildavsky to be an astute student of academic work habits. Describing me perfectly, he noted how inefficient so many academics are, and he mentioned a piece he had once written on his own graduate and subsequent professional writing. Entitled “Things I never knew,” this remarkable essay provided variations on the theme: “Common knowledge in the University said you couldn’t . . . (combine teaching and research, and thrive at both) but I didn’t know that, so I did (teach X,Y, and Z, and write a book about Z)” (Wildavsky 1971). The spirit of the essay combines homage to his teachers and an irrepressible sense of what’s possible to do with steady work, reading, research, and writing a bit each day.

Wildavsky’s essay gave me such a shot in the arm that in the three days after I read it I wrote an essay that I’d been meaning to write for at least a year. As if in a flash, there it was, and accepted four months later for publication with only slight revisions necessary. “In a flash”? Hardly. The essay had been presented as a lecture several times, and it had “cooked” for well over a year. I felt lucky to get it out of the oven at all.

Would I show Wildavsky’s essay to graduate students? I was careful, afraid that Wildavsky’s bravado, to say nothing of his productivity, might only bury someone’s last shred of self-confidence. If I had read the piece in the middle of the desert of my dissertation, I might have packed my bags and quit. Wildavsky wrote in a major key; I write, obviously, in minor. There’s a simple test to take here. Read Wildavsky’s wonderful “Things I Never Knew” when you’re not completely swamped with work. If it makes you want to write, fine: do it! If not, why worry? But I still wondered as a new assistant professor: How could I learn to write?

I had drafted several articles at Santa Cruz. First, I reworked the third chapter of my dissertation into an article. Accepted provisionally by a journal that then folded, this piece has still never been published. I wrote a second article as a synopsis of my dissertation. After several journals had rejected it and I’d made some revisions, it was finally published three years later. I revised a third article from the appendix to a paper I’d done years before in graduate school. The other students in a graduate political theory seminar had curiously liked the appendix better than my paper. Searching for life after the dissertation, I revised that essay on “Listening” but only published it two years after leaving Santa Cruz, five years after first writing it. I drafted a fourth piece over one long weekend after Polly Marshall, a student at Santa Cruz, had asked me how Ivan Illich’s *Medical nemesis* related to Habermas’s work, if it did at all, and I found the answer interesting and striking enough to fill thirty pages. With some luck and not too many surprises, that essay was finally published nearly seven years after it was written. So much for immediate gratification! Finally I prepared a fifth short essay for a public administration conference in the spring, thanks to a friend’s invitation and encouragement. I sent that piece off to
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Public Administration Review. Editor Gawthorp was interested, thoughtful, firm, and negative. I was only beginning to learn about the human qualities of editors and their judgments about style, audience, and fit – in addition to content. That essay was published in a smaller journal two years later. So nothing – and I felt it as exactly that, nothing – was published quickly in the years following my dissertation.

During my first year at Cornell I tried to keep up with classes and the usually fruitless letters to journal editors. One editor said of one piece, “Too narrow”; another said of a second essay, “Too broad.” One Very Important Person solicited essays for a book project, so I dutifully worked up an article I hoped to publish as a chapter; I didn’t hear anything from him for fifteen months except “still working on it,” until I finally learned that the whole project had been scrapped. So much for publishing with VIPs. At the end of that first year I talked to Terry Terauchi, an old friend practicing poverty law in San Francisco. I told him that it looked like I’d never publish anything, and if that were true, then I might as well move back to sunny California and pump gasoline. He thought that I should keep at it awhile. He voted with friend Shimon, who was no less persistently and provocatively demanding, “Just one clear fifteen-page paper that says what you really want to say!” I was ready to keep at it, but if this was what writing in the university was like, I wasn’t going to be making any long-range plans.

Writing my dissertation had been the most isolating experience of an otherwise wonderfully collegial graduate school existence. Would the work of my dissertation really be, in retrospect, as unique as many people assured me, or would all scholarly writing be like that? The first year at Cornell was so full that I only had more questions, not answers. There was indeed life after the dissertation; that was a discovery second only to my glimpse of a promising new research program. So I still had to learn to write – but about a literature, critical social theory, that might as well have been in Greek as far as my colleagues and students in planning were concerned. I’d put “Hermeneutics and critical theory in practice” in the subtitle of my “Listening” paper, and a senior colleague quipped, “Herman who?” I was too new, and too junior, to be amused.

But friend Shimon edited ruthlessly, and I paid attention and rewrote. My papers became shorter and clearer. Sentences were still long, phrases were abstract, and the language at times was closer to German than to English, but the responses from journal editors improved. I wrote and rewrote more. Shimon was insistent, never satisfied, sure that I might yet produce something with more substance and less promise. Just fifteen pages . . . just fifteen clear pages! Was I about to satisfy, and thus perhaps stop, such a source of help and encouragement?

I found writing after my dissertation both isolating and not, both highly personal and deeply common. I found that I began, and years later have only yet begun, to develop skills of listening, editing, revising, adjusting style and gauging voice – that I still barely understand. After five years or so, it seemed I’d published enough to make two coherent books of related essays, with a fair bit more “in the pipeline.” Yet I perpetually felt that I worked far below capacity, and so I kept on trying to learn more: how best to write?

I found that graduate students generally find very little that helps them to anticipate or learn to do the writing that they will increasingly do. So I made several notes about the problems of professional-academic writing that students or faculty may confront, as I did. Some of these problems surprised me, and others bewildered me; all were, I found, important to face. To paraphrase Wittgenstein speaking of his Tractatus, the notes that follow are only steps on a ladder to be left behind as readers find their own idiosyncratic ways to write more powerfully (Wittgenstein 1972, 6.54).
Things I never knew about taking the risks to write: cautions concerning the seamy side of the academy

1. Fundamentalism

I did not know to watch out for academic fundamentalism: the hyper-critical inclination of colleagues to damn a writer for not resolving the problems of truth, justice, legitimacy or – to achieve all three in one fell swoop – of making the revolution. By the fundamentalist criterion, the whole tradition of political and social theory is simply a record of failure. Each “new” theorist can be shown to be old, fundamentally flawed, a false hope, a source of insight leading inevitably down a blind alley. The implication for the beginning writer: expect intellectual quicksand and little progress. What Jeremy Shapiro characterized brilliantly, when he wrote of neo-Marxist, intellectual sectarianism, as “the leftwing samurai tradition” finds itself practised as aggressively in the graduate school tradition as well (see also Mee Kam’s experience in Chapter 1.4). If writing a dissertation, though, turns out to be reconstructively synthetic as well as de-constructively analytic, we can easily feel ourselves not well served by a graduate training prizing critical analysis to the exclusion of all else (see also Campbell in Chapter 1.5).

2. Literalism

I was ill prepared for the blinding literalism of many academics. Except when a researcher is particularly concerned with the conceptual evolution of a theory itself, he or she must always ask why the analysis in question exists – whether it’s a theoretical argument or a case study – and what it seeks to do, how it might be more clearly articulated. In this way we can build with our resources, not bemoan their limits. A gardener fertilizes soil rather than castigating it; we need to do as much with what we read. I found myself suspect for asking what seem to me to be essential questions: given a problem of interest, how does a theory direct our attention – tell us where to look? When we look, what else do we see? Why?

When we can make sense of the “what else we see,” we have a chance to extend and not simply reproduce our theory. When we can explain how that “what else” matters, we can build upon our theory at hand. That’s one significant part of the search in “research” – yet it’s vulnerable: literalists will attack such efforts as deviating from the boundaries of the given theory. I try to remind myself: we should break those boundaries, or those theories and our results will never improve. If researchers should illuminate problems – the lived experiences – being investigated in new ways, then they should not wear the same blinders that others do. Subordinating theoretical literalism to life experience, Herbert Blumer argued that the first principle of research was respect for those studied.

3. Reductionism

I did not know to beware of reductionists or labellers: that my work would be so identified with the “theory” I often used (no matter how I changed it in appropriating it!) that at times my work would be stigmatized, or even dismissed, independent of my specific arguments or the real product of the analysis at hand. I now believe academic cowardice (or, slightly more defensibly, prejudice) to be as pervasive as that in any other segment of society, the rhetoric of the academy’s courageous search for truth notwithstanding. Students who take any risks at all are likely to learn what I found to be this hard lesson. They will take their risks and find that
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some readers hand them labels rather than arguments. Rather than facing criticism about what they’ve written, they’ll be called “idealists,” or “too quantitative,” or “Germanic,” or “Marxist,” or “neo-classical,” or “basically liberals.” I was not prepared to have doctoral or faculty colleagues reduce my work to clichés and labels, if not wholly bury or dismiss it in the process. Some earlier warning, some assault perhaps on my naïveté about the “older, wiser, brighter,” might have helped me.

I didn’t know that the ivory tower is a glass house. So let me offer a warning: academics and writers will throw stones. You’re writing about Marx? You’ll be asked, “Didn’t he produce Stalinism?” You’re writing about Daniel Bell? You’ll be asked, “Didn’t he edit a journal with Irving Kristol, who’s even closer to Norman Podhoretz, who edits Commentary . . . ?” You’re writing about Habermas, something on communication? You’ll hear, “Doesn’t he write those long Germanic sentences . . . ‘communication’ you say?” The more concerned you are with the substance of what you’re writing, the more bewildered you’ll be by snide ad hominem argument, name-calling, criticism by innuendo, invocations of loyalty oaths – all in place of detailed, careful criticism of your work. When you hear this from friends, feelings of bewilderment will turn into feelings of having been betrayed. There’s only one thing to do: keep writing. Your skin will thicken, and you’ll discover who your friends are. But this, I found, was the hardest lesson to learn.

4. Shortcuts that short-change or mystify readers

I thought that I needed to use several expressions that were not quite ordinary, but I did not anticipate the results of doing that very well at all. Including “hermeneutic” or “subjective probability” or “hegemonic” in an essay that’s not written just for “theorists” may be dismissed because those terms are hardly “ordinary language.” At least two points arise here.

First, I do believe I should write in as plain and accessible a prose as possible, without sacrificing the precision of the analysis. Anything said in long sentences can almost always – or always – be said more clearly in short sentences. By improving my prose, I can gain the trust of the reader that I need, once in a special while, to use a less familiar technical term. Ideally, authors should earn readers’ trust through the care and clarity reflected in their writing, sentence by sentence.

Second, though, where is it written that an essay in sociology, planning, or philosophy should be simpler than an essay about biochemistry, microbiology, or zoology? Anti-intellectualism too often comes masked in the clothes of the simple reader asking for something “easy to read.” Laziness afflicts readers no less than authors. But that is no excuse for unnecessarily difficult writing, poor rewriting, inadequate editing, and so on. The effects of laziness upon authors are far more devastating, ultimately embarrassing, and ironically ineffectual.

So we should not confuse two issues: every author has the responsibility to be as clear and compelling, as editorially scrupulous as he or she can be, given the subject matter – but the responsibility only for that. The reader must not suffer an author’s – a student’s, a professor’s, or a professional writer’s – carelessness, laziness, or editorial fatigue; but that in turn is no reason for the reader not to work, not to think hard about what’s written, or even to reread.

5. Jargon as a recipe for boredom

Nevertheless, I learned reasonably quickly not to use technical terms or the still more pervasive political clichés to which I’ve been too blind. Using unnecessary, unfamiliar terms does precisely what reviewer Barbara Grizzuti Harrison once criticized poet Adrienne Rich’s political rhetoric
for doing; it bores the reader to disaffection. Jargon is a crutch with an ironic flaw: no one can walk on it (1979).

Graduate students are in a fix here. They have to read a scrambled, diffuse, rambling literature. In the social sciences and humanities they find polemical texts written in a variety of voices inevitably different from the students’ own subjects. Every ordinary pressure, in the beginning at least, leads students to adopt sympathetically the style and sentence structure of the authors whose work the student finds particularly compelling. Yet that student must fight to write as clearly as he or she possibly can, for readers never to be met as well as for those indeed to be met. And that means only one thing: editing and rewriting, line-by-line, paragraph-by-paragraph, subsection-by-subsection (until it all fits together).

The only way I know to begin this process, and perhaps to relearn it with every new essay, is to have a critical friend read my work and show me, in a sentence here, sentence there, how to avoid jargon and write more clearly. The year following my dissertation was, I am grateful to say, full of such criticism. Friend Shimon attacked substance and style alike. Beside an all too typical polemical passage I’d written, one of his marginal notes read, “How dead does the horse have to be before we can stop beating it?” He had a way of making a point. After looking at the sentences he shortened, at all the periods (or “full stops”) he inserted, I thought for a moment that perhaps his editing was a pointillist painting. Friend Victor worked on French health policy issues; he edited in a complementary way. Circling various phrases, he’d noted in the margins, “B.E.L.” I knew better than to take the notation as a French adjective. I asked him to translate. Each of these circled phrases, he told me, reflected a “Bastardization of the English Language.”

Slowly my friends were making their point. We write to convey an argument to someone. As Shimon might put it, every use of an unfamiliar phrase in a text can drive away readers the way that a strange object in a soup might deter diners. Writing with jargon is often just repulsive, and authors suffer the consequences along with their readers.

6. Daring and caring to be different

I did not appreciate the risks of being different. Learning slowly, I found that at times we have to ask research questions in new ways if we are to find new answers. If we shape answers to ready-made conclusions, our results are likely to be banal because they are predictable. We might answer important research questions not by asking what Marx, or Freud, or Keynes saw but (if we have learned from others’ work) by asking what we now see that’s important and surprising in the particular cases we are investigating. What reactions – considered thoughts and feelings – does our material evoke in us that have not been noted again and again? What’s intriguing, fascinating, challenging, worrisome, threatening, hopeful, confirmable in what we see? Why?

When we respond to these questions, we write as authors who speak from experience – the experience of research, of continuing and careful search, of asking honest questions, of facing a situation and being able to wonder about it with all the care deserved by the case at hand. When we let ourselves care about what we are investigating, we find, as Hannah Arendt suggests, that caring and thinking have deep connections. If we can explain what we see and what others may care about too, we will have something to say and our readers will have as much to think about.

The forced separation of thinking and caring sterilizes writing. Many social scientists forget that objectivity comes not from the divorce of intellect and emotion, but from processes of criticism in a community of inquirers (as Karl Popper wrote long ago and as Hilary Putnam and Martha Nussbaum argue so eloquently today). Such criticism embodies the passion for inquiry, the passion to find out, to clear up confusion, to reveal processes not recognized before,
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to be right in an argument whose other side seems deeply misleading. Far from being free of it, objectivity requires both passion and respect; respect for previous thoughtful and sensitive work, and passion to write as sharply, clearly, and insightfully as possible.

Consider it another way: authors bored with their material will bore their readers. Fascinated and intrigued authors who work to be clear can pass along that fascination and intrigue to their readers. But authors who suppress all emotion and care, passion and motivation, in a misguided quest for a detached objectivity are likely to murder their own prose. This is no appeal for a parade of an author’s values, wishes, fantasies, or political biases. But authors should make plain, not hide, the significance and mystery of their subjects.

7. Fantasies of completeness

I did not know, but I learned slowly, about the lure of completeness – and equally, of course, about the temptation to mail off half-baked ideas, assertions without arguments, arguments without recognition of others’ work.

Authors who send a few essays to journals for review can learn a lot, about both their own writing and the idiosyncrasies of the journal review process. Some comments from reviewers will be about the submitted essay: how it’s crafted, how clear it is or isn’t, how it’s argued. Those comments turn the review process into a real learning process that generates constructive criticism and suggestions for helpful changes.

But there will also be other types of comments about the essay’s general style, philosophy, or method. These comments simply indicate whether the author has knocked on the right door: does the essay fit the style of the journal, the type of audience that it seeks to address, the philosophy of the editorial board? Sometimes, though, the comments imply that the editor has sent the piece to a wacky reviewer; that happens.

One early article of mine was rejected as “a-historical and incomplete” by one journal, but accepted six months later as “an original contribution” by another. I cared less about their general judgments than about their specific suggestions to improve the text (when they provided some). So I ended up publishing the essay in the latter journal. The point: some, but not all, journal referees and editors can help us revise our writing, just as some colleagues can, but truly helpful ones will be equally hard to find.

What then of the lure of completeness? In some cases this is a compulsion – to be perfect or not to finish, for example – and there may be nothing to do but to look elsewhere for productivity, or for professional help. But many times an author really can avoid the dangers of overzealously having to read one more book, to include one more source, to go over it all one more time. Showing the work to colleagues can help a bit. But if you hold on to something that others whom you respect still advise you to submit and publish, the problem’s likely to be more one of fear than of craft. Maybe other good counsel can help.

There’s always more to be done. In the well-meaning search for depth, we can pile pages of notes upon pages of notes, type quote upon quote – and never have anything to show. Not showing our work means, practically, not being able to learn from the responses of others, as readers might puzzle over these arguments but find those interesting, or undeveloped, or novel. Not showing a draft – a tentative if not terribly rough one – means cutting off the ideas, suggestions, encouragement, and stimulation that feed everything we do in the first place. So the search for completeness feeds not just a state of conceptual hunger (one source of always wanting to do more) but a state of social isolation too: having nothing with a legible beginning, middle, or end to show a few people familiar with the issues, we cannot learn from anyone’s advice and
counsel, if only from their “Section 3 is the weak part” or “The point is never made clear” or “How do these sections go together?” Such comments might not seem to say much, but they can be extraordinarily helpful.

But there’s another problem of completeness that’s common to graduate thesis writing and “first articles.” As writers we can often confuse “introductions” with “backgrounds,” and we can lose months. One doctoral student I know felt compelled, in a political-economic study of regional development, to begin his dissertation with four chapters, running 120 pages, that explained and introduced the methods of political economy, historically, analytically, and critically. His doctoral committee noted that several introductory political economy texts already existed, told him to take those first 120 pages out of his dissertation, and suggested that he begin with the next chapter, the first discussion of the particular problem of economic development in question. Ouch.

The introduction to an essay or graduate thesis should introduce the essay, or the thesis, not the subject matter. The introduction should tell the reader what’s coming, what to expect, and why. Then a section or chapter can provide substantive background, but only as specifically necessary for the particular discussion to follow. To avoid overly formal beginnings, we might wish to write a prose that flows as smoothly as fiction, but we can hardly assume that we have the gifts of novelists. Too often, though, authors try to ease into their topics as they presume they have the gifts of accomplished storytellers, and we wind up with a supposedly analytic argument of thirty pages whose point isn’t made clear until page fifteen and whose reader experiences far more confusion than clarity.

So I came to face the daily contradiction: (1) I had to write for actual readers and listen to their howls and nastiness when they responded to what I thought were decent drafts, and (2) I had and have somehow to believe in myself— or in my political or ethical commitments— enough to persist. Above my desk for many years was a quote from playwright William Golding, who wrote, “I know I’m not a critic’s darling. But if I believed in what they wrote, I’d have slit my wrists a long time ago. No one likes criticism . . . You have to do the best you can . . . and keep on going.”

8. Overcoming distraction and procrastination: two hours a day!

I learned, too, to guard against distraction, but this was a continuing battle at best. Almost anything else I could do in a day would offer more immediate gratification and assurance of a decent outcome than writing.

Writing and doing research is uncertain, ambiguous, and precariously balanced between saying the trite and obvious and writing obscurely and opaquely. This feeds the temptation to read just one more book or article that might vindicate our argument (or, we dread, tell us that someone has already said just what we hope to say). In competition with the time for writing, a thousand distractions easily appear as necessary tasks, vital obligations, simple duties, and one-time-only opportunities. Those tasks will be doable, the obligations fulfillable, the duties perhaps impeccably performed, the opportunities there to be seized and enjoyed. But without writing regularly, writing will suffer: continuity will simply evaporate. One’s prose voice will be uneven or plural; discontinuity will cost dearly in terms of repeated and miserable start-up costs: hard as it can be to write, it can be even harder to begin. Tempting reasons not to write always arise—and to write anything, you have to resist those temptations. We can always find reasons to wait until just before deadlines come, but if we wait till then to write finally, we’ll lose much valuable time. That’s time we’ve lost for rewriting as well as for research, for discovering and transforming the argument and its significance every bit as much as assembling the raw materials.
The best way to avoid these many tempting distractions turns out to be simple, a challenge to implement, but profoundly important: make a regular time to write each day. Keeping that time to write means we do not go for meetings, movies, meals, coffee, walks, library tours, bookshop visits, tête-à-têtes with friends: it means that we write paragraphs, paragraphs that go together. If one day we don’t know what to write, that’s a problem to allow to percolate in the remaining twenty or more hours in that day – not in tomorrow’s time to write. If it sounds as if we might as well say, “Write during the same time each day and keep to it religiously,” it is not because of anything theological, but because it illustrates the commitment and the discipline that sustained writing demands of us. Violinists do it; basketball players do it; we can do it – every day, two hours a day, no matter what.

The subject matter at hand never expresses itself; to have the insight, hunch, or solution in our mind won’t get it onto paper or into legible form: we must make the effort, with our hands no less than our minds, to construct and to craft the paper. We must say a resolute, “No” to all those distractions that threaten to pull us away from the difficulties and the miseries, the uncertainties and the ambiguities of writing: “No” even to reading when we should be writing sentences into paragraphs, paragraphs into sections, sections into essays . . .

Taking a class at Tanglewood, composer and conductor Andre Previn made the essential point: “If instead of making music you think about it, fantasize about it, that’s a lost day. Down the drain, you’ll never recapture it” (Drees Ruttencutter, 1983, p. 85). Nothing could be truer of writing. I can think and think and think about a problem, whatever that means. But only when I try to write through it do I make progress both conceptually and textually. So now I tell myself and my students not just to think some more about a problem, but to “think with your fingers”: write and rework, manually; rewrite, and show others the product. Think about it as physical labour, and your mind will follow and even lead.

It’s fascinating to watch the spillover from this cultivated routine, this habit, this daily discipline. Something in the rest of our day or our week must feed this daily appetite. Writing this way can help us – push, stimulate, require us – to develop research skills to keep pace, but only if we write pieces with beginnings, middles, and ends to be shown to others and criticized. Otherwise, we risk amassing facts and details and later bits of argument into an amoeba, an ill-defined mass without structure or shape. What can begin as the resolution to avoid a thousand distractions, then, can develop into a skilled discipline that combines research activity with the craft of writing, every day, just two hours a day.

In addition, daily writing provokes thinking. Many people write not only to order ideas but also to try actually to figure things out, to tease out the implications of their hunches, of what they seem to “think.” We can write to work through problems we see, or to come to terms with a problem we care about. If it’s possible to show coherent drafts to others and learn from what strikes them, so much the better.

9. Knowing when not to listen: cynical voices

But no one had warned me about what one might call “keeping cynicism at bay.” I wasn’t prepared for the naysayers, the pessimists, or, actually, the cynics and the self-indulgent. If we need to take risks and write, we must hope and believe that in our fields we can do better, that we can learn, that we can dispel a few of the myths that we inherit, that several other people might also care enough about the issues that interest us to help us extend or refine or reframe our draft as it now may be.

To write is to offer an argument, a way of understanding something. But offers can easily fall flat. The naysayers outnumber the plucky by at least 10:1; the cynics outnumber the hopeful by
at least 100:1, and the pessimists outnumber everyone else by the same ratio. This majority is not silent. If we get involved in only 25 per cent of the opportunities we have to discuss what’s altogether wrong with this analysis, why that analysis can’t work, or why that approach is fundamentally inadequate, we may well just forget ever doing any new work of our own, taking any risks of our own. Paralysis is abetted less by pluralism than by cynicism, and it comes cheap.

I do not mean that we should not listen to advice. But we have to consider not only the advice but who’s giving it as well. Are they already set against the type of research we’re proposing or considering, the arguments they’re supposedly responding to? Are they likely only to respond to a general impression, to give us a pre-packaged idea, or to expound some general perspective in the guise of specific advice? Colleagues and friends can watch, advise, warn, or encourage, but only the person wishing to write can take the risks to write.

10. Yet another demonstration of what’s been shown

I knew only a little about the internal distractions: the dangers of the idée fixe. That important realities like racial inequality are true, and can be shown to be true, is often far less important than showing in new, more powerful ways just how they are true.

John Austin remarked once, “Fact is richer than diction” (Austin 1961: 195). The world will always supply us with more than our pet theories or conclusions lead us to suspect. This does not necessarily disconfirm what we expect, for it can lead us to new ideas and insights. Any writer must certainly work in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty to bring order out of chaos, order out of an infinity of detail and possible descriptions. But our problem of research is often far less to prove a point (Power matters! Surprise?) than to ask how something in the world works, happens, is possible, is connected, or might yet be. Simply to amass evidence for a conclusion already reached leads quickly to others’ suspicion, distrust, boredom, and one’s own loss of credibility: for here we have not a search for knowledge but simply the selective presentation of evidence to support a point. That someone can find evidence to support a position is only as interesting as the position itself. The sixth thousandth demonstration that in yet another case “the market solves” or that “state policy favours the capitalist class” becomes banal, unless the research shows us something new about how that market works, how a policy favours one class and oppresses another. Like all inquiry, neoclassical and critical research need not only replicability but ever more powerful answers to the “how” questions.

Consider an example. That planners can be powerless in a given setting is a thesis, or a plaintive cry, as old as the profession. Taken by itself, the thesis is likely to evoke a response like, “So what else is new?” The research problem here is to explore just how, in previously unexamined ways, social relations of power (influence? authority?) and powerlessness work to provide whatever “power” planners might have in particular settings. Better, perhaps, as Berkeley sociologist Neil Smelser suggested in office hours one day, the problem is always to explore the variations in the investigated world. Upon what do the differences (e.g., in planners’ power) depend? A given policy serves the ruling (or working) class – depending on what (variables)? Can anyone (who?) affect those variables? With answers to these questions, the research results become potentially “practical.” A planner is more or less powerful in an agency if – what? Depending on what variables? If some of those variables can be influenced by planners themselves, or by other specific actors, then again the research results are potentially practical. Research is practical or impractical precisely as it directs readers’ attention to aspects of the world they need to know about. Yet, political practicality aside, research can open up issues, suggest new connections and contingencies, show how something cared about in the world comes to happen in the first place. But one more breathless demonstration of an idée fixe will most likely advance not research but fatigue and new suspicions of researchers’ hidden agendas.
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11. Less flattering qualities of academic intercourse

I wondered about the so-called community of scholars that I might join as an assistant professor. Would this be a real community in any sense of the word? Competition seemed rampant; specialization separated members of the same field; jealousy and envy afflicted academics no less than any other group of people. Or more — a friend attributed a saying to George Steiner: “The reason that academic politics are so vicious is that the stakes are so low.” That sounded funny, but, untenured, I certainly felt that I had a lot at stake.

What could one hope for in this academic “community of scholars”? The most common dissertation advice I’d heard concerned limits — “Take a manageable problem and don’t try to do too much!” — but that would hardly fuel the fires of difficult and sustained research activity. I’d heard “manageable” as “conventional and mundane,” which struck me as the kiss of death. Looking back many years later, I can see my mistake: “manageable” did not mean “not exciting” or “not fresh and new.” It meant “achievable,” so that I could live to tell the story and continue whatever good work I might have been lucky enough to do.

In graduate school, of course, the isolation of dissertation writing leads to crazy swings of mood. Feeling lost in three literatures at one moment, the glimmer of a fresh idea may feed what my friend Leland Neuberg called satirically “the Einstein complex” of PhD students. So dissertation committee members might provide desperately needed encouragement in one meeting, but smash unbridled hopes and stubborn adolescent fantasies at a next meeting.

We write at the edges of the shadows of giants. Seeking to go forward, we cannot really follow the baseball player Satchel Paige’s advice: “Don’t look back — they might be gaining on you!” So how, then, are we to write?

The problem is, in our time and circumstance, in our place, not for all time and places, what can we say to illuminate some problem that we care about? Had Marx and Weber, Foucault and Freud and company “solved” our problems, we might have little research to do. But we take these authors as seminal because they posed problems for us in fresh and powerful ways, and they continue to show us aspects of the world we still glimpse only dimly. We have further problems, though, because their world is not quite our world. So our questions evolve: given our inherited ways of thinking in and about the world, some ways of paying attention to what’s going on around us, what now do we want to understand better, to recognize, to watch out for, to live with? We can address these questions as members of a scholarly community dispersed in time and space.

If we imagine readers bored with what fascinates us (and perhaps fascinated with what bores us), we might never be able to write. To write, we might need solitude, but we also need the textual companionship of other authors, living or not, who also cared to write about the problems we confront. As we come to realize that our problems have intrigued others in other times and places, and that these problems still call for attention, we may feel more confident and less isolated in our writing. Strangely, though, many of the people in our day-to-day lives may know very little (and care less) about the problems we’re writing through — and that’s as it must be.

This peculiar social circumstance of the academic life makes it all the more important for us to remember that our textual companions can be as important to us as those with whom we eat and drink. Machiavelli put it this way when he wrote of his days near Florence in 1513:

On the coming of evening, I return to my house and enter my study; and at the door I take off the day’s clothing, covered with mud and dust, and put on garments regal and courtly; and re-clothed appropriately, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where received by them with affection, I feed on that good which is only mine and which I
was born for, where I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reasons for their actions; and they in their kindness answer me; and for four hours of time I do not feel boredom, I forget every trouble, I do not dread poverty, I am not frightened by death; entirely I give myself over to them.

Machiavelli (1961: 142)

How many of us, upon entering a library or personal study, begin to converse with the wise and brilliant voices of our past?

12. Help others help you: share coherent drafts

I had little sense of how my writing and research would progress. Fascinated in graduate school with the philosophy of science, as a new faculty member I had to write instead about issues of planning and policy. Full of sketchy ideas that could have taken me years to work on, I quickly discovered the coercive magic of deadlines.

If I had to present a paper in Baltimore at the Conference of the American Planning Association, I knew that I had to have a paper in hand, and twenty copies to distribute, by the day I’d have to leave home. Deadlines concentrate the mind and move the fingers, writing longhand or typing. Most of what I’ve written, and certainly the best of it, has been written originally for conference obligations I’d taken on months ahead of time. For months I’d ruminate, collect notes on the side, make false starts, and have the pressure slowly build until finally I produced a draft, honouring earlier outlines or not, that I could rewrite and rewrite and rewrite and show others. I could then put those drafts with carefully connected beginnings, middles, and ends in the mail, not in a file drawer: I tried to submit these quickly to journals for possible publication, once the conference deadline had forced me to produce a showable draft.

I learned a fundamental rule: never, never, never sit on a draft, never withhold a decent draft from the potentially helpful review of the referees of appropriate journals. Such drafts were coherent wholes, I thought, by the time I submitted them; yet nearly complete as they were, they often still needed 10–20 per cent more revision. Most often, journal referees’ comments really did help to guide those revisions. With comments in hand, some much more helpful or relevant than others, I could usually revise and publish the submitted essay.

Often I found that I faced split reviews from the anonymous referees. One would recommend publication, perhaps with suggested modifications, and one would be more inclined to ask for substantial revisions before recommending publication. Editors usually dealt with this situation by making the cautious decision of asking me to rewrite and respond explicitly in a cover letter to both sets of reviews. So often I would respond by making clear where I could, or could not, rewrite to honour a reviewer’s suggestion, and my apparent efforts to consider the reviewers’ comments seriously almost always sufficed to have the journal editor accept my partial revision.

Of course I’ve also broken this fundamental rule; I have four or five papers sitting in files taking up space and waiting for revisions or just for stamps and an address before being resubmitted to an appropriate journal. Nevertheless, it’s a mistake to have done all the work to draft a paper and not to submit it for publication – not to respond then to a reviewer’s comments or, finding that impossible with one journal, not to resubmit it to another potentially more interested one. Drafts of papers should collect not dust but referees’ comments and the acceptances of editors.

No matter what I understood about the journal editors’ review processes, though, still I found that coercive deadlines organized my writing. At first I castigated myself for needing these crutches, but as I came to recognize the perpetually distracting forces and random demands that
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disrupt an academic’s time and attention, I began to appreciate the deadlines as guideposts for my own constructive use.

13. Sketch conclusions early, draft introductions last

Finally, I did know one thing, but I practised it only too falteringly. Bob Biller taught his Berkeley students to write their policy papers backwards: to begin with their tentative conclusions and then to do the research to attempt to disprove or to corroborate them. I found I did this naturally but not literally. I could not quite begin with a page actually labelled “Conclusions,” but I would often, especially under the pressure of a deadline, make and then remake a short list of “Here’s what I really want to say.”

That list always evolved. Half of the original items remained to the end, and half evaporated as empty or wrong-headed or overly ambitious. Similarly, half of the final list reflected additions made along the way. But towards the end, as I saw that indeed “these five points are really what I want to say,” then finally I found I could write the essay at hand. Before that, I had too little idea of where I was going. I couldn’t write the beginning until I knew what the argument was going to be, but I didn’t know the argument until I started with my bets, with my hunches and questions about a problem, and then worked out pages here and there about the major points that I thought my research would support. Often a page that I’d write would lead me to one simple thought that I hadn’t had before, and then with it, I’d have to put aside the page and begin again to explore the point at hand. The search process in such writing is slow, preparatory work. But what’s preparatory and what’s not? There’s no telling beforehand.

All that’s clear is that writing involves cycles and circles, persistence and regularity. Before there can be the page(s) on “Tentative Bets/Possible Conclusions” that I now ask students to sketch, there must be some immersion, some decent familiarity with the material at hand. Otherwise, what is anyone to have conclusions about? But at the same time, without the sense of an anchor or destination, a rough idea of possible conclusions, and more than a broad purpose, one’s writing can often be far too broadly formulated. Writing, like speaking and like acting, is all about choice and judgment. By balancing the exploration of a territory with a perpetual checking of desirable destinations, we avoid getting too far off track and lost. Given a problem and some study of it (by experience, knowledge of the literature, interviews, and so on), it’s important, and enormously practical, to be sketching, refining, revising, adding to one’s conclusions as – and not only after – one does the work to substantiate them. Only with a sense of destination can one decide ultimately which roads to take. At times it still sounds backwards to me, writing tentative conclusions so early on, but it’s enormously helpful even so.10

Notes
1 Originally framed as “Notes on the craft of academic writing,” this paper dates from 1984. Convinced that misery loves company, I wrote it for students and junior academics also struggling with writing. Edited slightly since, it appears shorter and edited once more for inclusion here.
2 Overreaching and underachieving, my dissertation was entitled, “Questioning and shaping attention as planning strategy: toward a critical theory of analysis and design” (UC Berkeley, 1977). Studying an environmental review office’s staff in a metropolitan planning department, I explored the ethics and politics of the selective attention shaped via planners’ practical (speech act) questioning as they did basic planning analysis of project proposals.
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4 That essay on “Listening: the social policy of everyday life” appeared as Chapter 7 in Planning in the face of power (University of California Press, 1989), and its themes underlie and animate most of what I have written and tried to explore further since then. Both The deliberative practitioner (Forester 1999) and Dealing with differences (Forester 2009) develop theoretical and practical aspects of the (extra)ordinary practice of listening to and with others (see, e.g., Forester 2012a, 2012b, 2013).

5 These books would eventually appear as Planning in the face of power (1989) and Critical theory, public policy, and planning practice (State University of New York Press, 1993). Both explore practice in contentious political contexts: the former found an audience in planning schools, the latter – perhaps too theoretical for planners, too planning/policy oriented for political theorists – seemed to find no audience at all.


7 We can find it, actually, in Alfred Schutz’s “postulate of adequacy,” but that has its own problems. A. Schutz, Phenomenology and Social Relations, ed. H. Wagner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).


10 Written in 1984 (see note 1), I broke my own rule with this paper and did not submit it for publication because I believed it was too idiosyncratically personal. Fifteen years later I discovered that it had had an underground existence at Cornell’s writing program, and I edited it slightly then to share with interested students and junior faculty.

References