

Tips for Building Sustainable Writing Habits

Schedule writing time

Write every day for at least 10 or 20 minutes. Honor your writing appointments. Avoid unplanned binge-writing. What will happen? Writing will become automatic, mechanical, and less emotional – just like every other routine.

Be accountable

Plan your daily and weekly writing goals. Proactively schedule your priorities rather than reactively prioritizing your schedule. If you still can't find time for writing, try tracking your time for a week. Is your time and effort aligned with your mission?

Delegate to coauthors

You don't have to be and do everything yourself. Perhaps a coauthor excels at particular tasks? Triage what needs to be accomplished and share the tasks with your coauthors.

Set concrete limits on each phase

Limit the amount of time and effort you expend. Decide in advance how many articles you'll read, from how far back, and/or for how many hours. Decide in advance on the sample size, or the hours will you spend on analysis, or the number of models you will run.

Break tasks into smaller pieces

Instead of broad, complex items like "Finish results section" on your 'to do' list, try listing specific tasks (e.g., "Open data file, run descriptive on final study groups, double-check models, build data table"). Expand your definition of writing to include ANY activity that contributes to a finished piece.

Plan realistic time for tasks

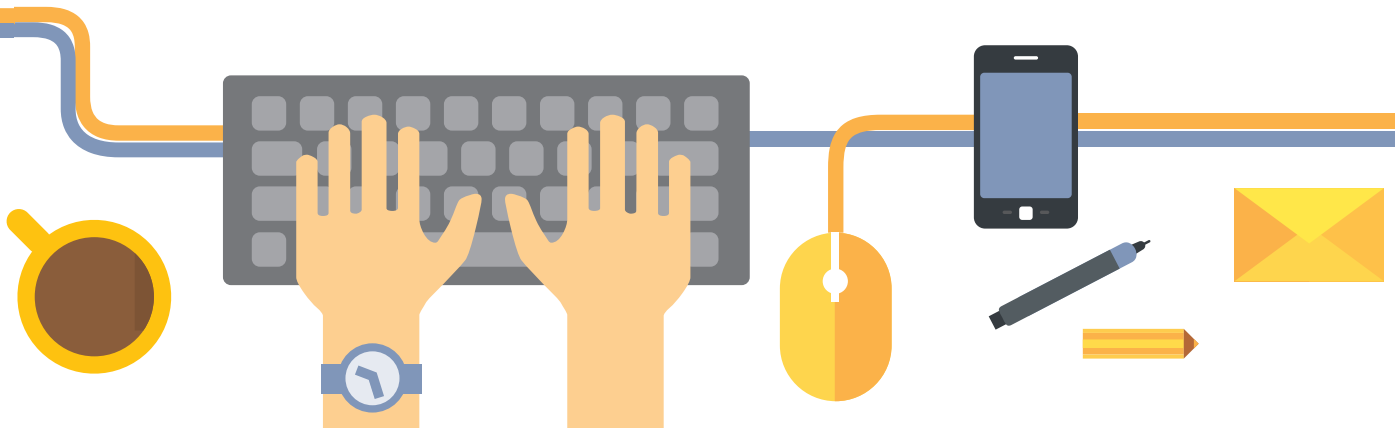
Analyze how much time each of your writing tasks really takes. For instance, will you spend a minute opening a file or 20 minutes searching for it? Or 2 minutes to double-check data or 15 minutes to rerun it just in case?

Use templates

Mimic the format, style, formula of published papers in your targeted journals.

Write to refine your ideas

Start writing the paper as soon as you have the idea. Write throughout the process to help you refine your ideas. Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, or grammar; just write like you're telling a story.



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Sound familiar?

My muse isn't here.

I need to be in the mood. I need to feel inspired. I'm not motivated. I work best under pressure.

There's no time!

I can't find time to write. I need a big chunk of time. I have too many interruptions or competing obligations.

It's too hard to start.

I don't know how to do _____. I've been putting off _____, because I hate that part. I don't know where to start.

I'm not ready to start.

I need more data. I need to run more models. I need to read more literature.

I'm not done yet.

I'm waiting for a coauthor's feedback. I need to reread it again. That section isn't perfect.

Reframe it!

Do you wait to be inspired to see your patients, teach your classes, attend meetings, or send emails? Writing is no different. There is NO writing muse. Writing is the currency of our trade. Writing is your job.

You need less time than you think. Writers who work for long stretches get less done with more stress than writers who work for brief, daily stretches.

Does your 'to do' list include these items? "Work on grant," "Write XYZ paper," or "Do analysis"? These are overwhelming tasks! Broad goals are different than SMART objectives.

Are you ever really ready to write? There's rarely an ideal time for anything. Forget about the New Year, Mondays, or the weekend. Just start already! Writing is not what we do AFTER we've figured it out, writing is HOW we figure it out!

Perfect is the enemy of good enough. Don't let your perfectionism thwart your progress. Get that paper out the door! Let the reviewers scrutinize!