

ADVICE

# Aiding the Writing-Stalled Professor



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By Joli Jensen | JULY 26, 2017

All too often, when we see colleagues who aren't writing, we look away. If they're assistant professors, we shrug as their tenure clock ticks — they'll either make it or they won't. If the writer's block comes after tenure, we ignore that, too (except maybe in their annual reviews), until we finally dismiss them as "deadwood."

Writing-stalled faculty members tend to cope with their frustrations in ways that end up being ineffective, or even destructive. Instead of writing, they throw themselves into teaching and service. They get unnecessarily embroiled in departmental politics. Or they create a flurry of research-related projects that won't meet tenure-and-promotion criteria no matter how creatively framed.

Some blocked writers try to reduce their shame by disparaging a more prolific colleague. They may devote themselves to deploring the shortcomings of their students, departments, field, and university. They may claim they are more responsive to their students — and doing more valuable service — than their "too-busy-with-writing" colleagues. Alternatively, some writing-stalled academics may avoid both teaching and service by proclaiming their need to focus on research — which somehow never gets written.

## 10 Essential Guidebooks on Academic Writing

A faculty-writing program needs a good collection of books to lend out to stalled writers -- general books on writing and productivity as well as handbooks focused on the rules, customs, and processes of academic publication. Here are 10 books --- some old, some new, and most of them aimed at scholarly writing -- that I've found especially essential to have on our shelves at the faculty-writing program at the University of Tulsa:

### On productivity and academic writing:

- *Professors as Writers: A Self-Help Guide to Productive Writing*, by Robert Boice (New Forums, 1990).
- *How To Write A Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing*, by Paul J. Silvia (American Psychological Association, 2007).
- *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write*, by Helen Sword (Harvard, 2017)
- *The Clockwork Muse: A Practical Guide to Writing Theses, Dissertations and Books*, by Eviatar Zerubavel (Harvard UP, 1999).

### For dealing with writer's block:

- *Around the Writer's Block: Using Brain Science to Solve Writer's Resistance*, by Roseanne Bane (TarcherPerigee, 2012).
- *Unstuck: A Supportive and Practical Guide to Working Through Writer's Block*, by Jane Anne Staw (St. Martins Griffin, 2005).

### For working within the norms of scholarly writing:

- *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success*, by Wendy Laura Belcher (Sage, 2009).
- *From Dissertation to Book*, by William Germano (Chicago, 2005).
- *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein (Norton, 2010).
- *Handbook for Academic Authors*, by Beth Luey (Cambridge, 2009).

Here's the paradox. Most of the consistently productive scholars I've known in my more than 30 years as a professor, at three different universities, have also been caring teachers and active in academic service work. And, you guessed it: Most of the angry, embittered, and problematic colleagues I've known have been toxically stalled writers.

I get that. When I'm happily writing, I feel competent — like I'm doing something that matters. I also feel engaged, and eager to help my students and colleagues as much as I can.

But when I'm struggling with my writing, I feel incompetent and like I'm wasting my time. Suddenly my students and colleagues start to seem unfairly demanding, and I end up either wanting to avoid service obligations entirely or throwing myself into them completely so as to supply myself with good reasons for not writing. I find fault. I complain and feel victimized. In short, when I am stalled in my scholarship, I'm on my way to becoming angry and embittered.

All of which is why I believe that the most direct way to improve academic life for students, faculty members, and administrators is to support faculty writing. Many academics, if not most, struggle with their writing. There's no reason to treat that struggle like a shameful secret or to mystify the writing process.

There are simple, straightforward, effective practices that can help us overcome writing barriers and maintain productivity, and we've been using them for years in the faculty writing program I designed and direct at the University of Tulsa. It doesn't take a hefty budget or a bloated bureaucracy to create and sustain a campus culture that supports faculty writing. It takes books, workshops, confidential consultations, and, most important, writing groups.

A variety of writing-support strategies are detailed in 2013's *Working With Faculty Writers*, edited by Anne Ellen Geller and Michele Eodice, and in my own book, *Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics*. But here are some guiding principles for creating an effective faculty writing program, based on what has worked on my campus:

- **It should be run by faculty, for faculty.** A writing-support program needs to be kept separate from any sort of administratively imposed training, and from any implication of being remedial. It's not about ferreting out lazy or weak writers. It's about learning and using effective techniques to overcome the particular writing barriers that all academics face.
- **It should offer many points of entry, some anonymous.** At my university, professors can drop by our faculty writing program on their own to check out books, pick up handouts, sign up for a particular workshop, see me confidentially, or join a writing group — whatever feels most helpful to them at the moment.
- **It should occupy a dedicated space.** We have a small room in the university library, open during library hours, with coffee and snacks available nearby. It is cozy and private, and it houses our resource collection. Our office also can be used for writing-group meetings and individual consultations.
- **It should have a curated resource collection.** By that I mean a selected group of books and articles about academic writing and publishing, available for checkout as well as browsing. Workshop handouts and related materials, as well as writing-program information, are always available in our office.
- **It should offer writing workshops.** These are brief, interdisciplinary, technique-oriented sessions (lasting one to two hours each), and scheduled semester by semester. Some of the topics we offer include: "Semester Planning;" "Writing Myths"; "Dealing with Stalled Projects"; "Protecting Time, Space, and Energy"; and "Becoming a Public Scholar."

- **Individual consultation should be an option.** That means private, confidential sessions. At my program, professors can come in for a single meeting or a series of visits. My focus in helping them is usually on process, not content, so we can identify and overcome whatever is hampering their writing.
- **It should offer daylong writing retreats.** These are held on the campus, lasting no more than six hours, with a two-hour writing session included. The retreats offer reminders about writing productivity techniques, as well as focused time to organize, schedule, and begin a writing project, including an accountability plan.
- **It should facilitate faculty writing groups.** Not every writer needs or benefits from a writing group but they're crucial for those who do. Writing groups meet regularly and are run by their members. In writing groups, too, the focus is on process not content. The group is a means by which faculty members can set and keep writing goals, and then explore why they were met, or not. Some professors grow out of their writing group. Some need it only for a semester, while others continue meeting for several years. Whatever their duration, writing groups are an unparalleled source of faculty support so long as: (a) they are confidential, (b) they draw from proven academic-writing techniques, and (c) they respond to the changing writing needs of the participants.

A faculty writing program that is just starting out doesn't have to mobilize all of these elements at once. And everyone on campus has a role to play in making it happen. As a faculty member, you could start a writing group on your campus and then propose a more formal faculty writing program for the entire institution. As an administrator, you could identify senior professors who are successful writers and make it possible for them to help their colleagues on this

front. Locate a dedicated space for the program, buy resource materials for it, and set up a small budget for the program to support workshops and individual consultations.

Writing is challenging for everyone, and the many ways that our writing stalls or stops should not be ignored or mystified. Instead of shunning (or shaming) writing-blocked colleagues, try creating a faculty writing program that gives them the tools and support they need to become productive writers.

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