

Stalled in the Writing?

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Having coached academic writers for more than a decade, I've noticed a pattern that tends to stall the development and publication of their research.

I've worked with a diverse group of humanists, social scientists, and STEM researchers, but they all hear the same drumbeat: "Get it out there!" The tremendous pressure to complete quality research and then send manuscripts out quickly can warp the writing process. In such a frantic atmosphere, even rigorously trained academics who care deeply about their topics can find themselves working from the outside in, rather than the reverse.

What Does That Mean? And Why Is it a Problem?

When the heat is on to publish, you cast around for ideas. Maybe you consider some research from your dissertation that you could frame in a new light. A related topic you've been teaching might work interestingly with that old material. You arrive at what seems like a great idea and then hammer out an abstract or a book proposal.

Yet no matter how many buzzwords you've used from your field, those abstracts and proposals don't seem to lead to the production of actual manuscripts. Driven by a sense of intense pressure to get quick results — or at least generate interest from journal editors or university presses — you may jump over critical stages in developing your arguments, testing out ideas, and examining the evidence. Another risk is that you may become so attuned to external factors, such as hot topics in your discipline, that your internal voice — the core of who you are as a scholar, what you find most compelling, and what you think your fields should pay more attention to — is drowned out.

You are working from the outside in. The upshot: When you turn to actually drafting your manuscript, you're apt to run into intellectual roadblocks and argumentative dead ends.

Working from the outside in can be seductive because it makes writers initially feel like they've made progress. But

all too soon, they find themselves stuck, unable to really develop their ideas and write. What initially seemed like a way to speed your process has actually created confusion, eroded your confidence, and heightened your fears about meeting that looming deadline.

How to Work From the Inside Out

Working from the inside out means your work is propelled by the questions and dilemmas intrinsic to the project itself. And your work is guided by your own internal compass as a scholar — what you care about most.

On a practical level, working from the inside out often means immersing yourself in the essential texts and theoretical approaches to your discipline. It means allowing yourself time to identify gaps and to test your intuitions about why those gaps exist or how they might be filled. All of that work is in the service of staking your intellectual claim — making your contribution to your field — or uncovering new areas that deserve evaluation.

I describe this stage as working from the inside out because you are focused on issues intimately related to the internal workings of your project.

The most effective way to work from the inside out is to use a variety of prewriting activities to help you discover the argument you truly want to make, and why it matters. I'll elaborate on prewriting in a moment but first you need to set the stage for when and where you will do the work. It's essential to make your project a weekly priority. An effective, supportive structure for your writing requires two elements:

- *Regular time in your schedule.* Admittedly, making that time can be a real challenge when you're juggling teaching and service with research, but the first step toward taking control of your own process is to carve out regular space each week on your calendar to do the work. It helps to realize you don't have to work on your project or write every single day. In the midst of a busy semester, set aside an hour two mornings a week and three hours on a weekend afternoon. It's better, of course, if you can dedicate 10 hours a week. However, establishing a habit of working even five hours every week will, over the course of the academic year, provide time to construct the necessary building blocks for your project. That means reading deeply, analyzing data, synthesizing and interpreting findings — all hallmarks of writing from the inside out.
- *A dedicated work space.* You need a safe place to experiment with ideas. And I don't just mean the safety of an office with a locked door. You also need a mental space where you can try out approaches and arguments free from a sense of looming critique. Several prewriting activities provide just such a safe space for the gestational stage that is essential to writing from the inside out. So many academics labor under the misperception that great scholars somehow churn out publishable drafts in short order. I've worked with enough of them to know that's a myth.

The Necessity of Prewriting

Good writing depends on being able to clearly articulate the purpose and argument of your project. To help chart your course and make it as efficient as possible, I recommend a technique called prewriting. It is an umbrella term for any writing you do before outlining or actually drafting your manuscript, and might take the form of free writing, journaling, note taking, or some combination of the three.

- *Free write to generate ideas.* To get started, try doing some free writing focused on a particular question related to your topic. Remember, this is private writing for your eyes only. And you can do it by hand or on a computer or other device. Give yourself a limited amount of time — from 5 to 20 minutes, for example — to jot down your thoughts without censoring or judging them in any way. Simply explore where they lead. This kind of exploratory writing is a fantastic way to launch an internal dialogue that can help shape elements of your ultimate manuscript. While some of your free writing will end up (deservedly) in the waste bin, you will also discover ideas and strategies you weren't consciously aware of before the exercise. The gems mined from this internal conversation can help you see specific steps to strengthen your evidence and realize more

compelling ways of framing and presenting it.

- *Keep a professional journal.* In her book, *Journal Keeping: How to Use Reflective Writing for Learning, Teaching, Professional Insight, and Positive Change*, Dannelle D. Stevens, a professor at Portland State University, encourages writers to experiment with keeping a professional journal. You can focus your journal around a particular project or use it as a space to think through the connections among your various projects. It can be a place to brainstorm about the big picture of your work and consider to what degree other commitments are interfering with your writing. Your journal can also help you make choices about what to focus on and what to step back from. It can even be a place to make to-do lists for your various scholarly projects and look for opportunities to save time, like planning courses that incorporate texts you're working with in your scholarship.
- *Take notes on your reactions.* Scholars, of course, regularly take notes that summarize information from sources. But another step in working on a project from the inside out is to blend information gathering with making notes to yourself with your initial thoughts about those sources. As you read and take fact-related notes, jot down your questions, doubts, and points of agreement or disagreement. Note places in your own argument where a dialogue with this material could enhance your own work. Perhaps you might be able to engage this source in a particular section of your manuscript, such as the literature review, analysis, or discussion section. The point is: You are weighing your sources against your own ideas. You're not just recording data or quotes you may use in your project; you're developing a dialogue with your sources.

Keep in mind: Whatever form your prewriting takes, you do not have to limit yourself to narrative text or prose. If you're a visual thinker, you may benefit from sketching out concept maps that show clusters of ideas and visually represent their relationship. Experimenting with drawing schematics can help you see the common denominators, so to speak, of your ideas and come closer to articulating the overarching ideas driving your project.

Once you've done enough inside work to clearly see the purpose and scope of your project, you're ready to take it to the outside world and begin articulating your argument for external audiences. The authors I work with who write from the inside out experience a high success rate in placing their articles and securing book contracts. That's convinced me that time spent developing your work with this approach greatly increases the chances of external audiences appreciating and publishing your work.