REPS Lab Manual (1):
Attitude and Tactics for Productive Academic Writing

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As a tenured professor, scholar, and mentor, I regularly see talented social scientists struggle with their writing. Let me be more specific: I have regularly seen myself and other academics struggle with organizing, articulating, and conveying their ideas and reasoning to other scholars *in written form*. It doesn't have to be this way. Writing is a constant feature of our research careers. Better to learn to manage this task than to have it manage you. Indeed, it would stink if the malaise that sometimes envelops our writing were to completely zap all the other joys that attend our vocation as scholars and instructors. We can do better, I think.

In this essay, I distill the attitude and tactics I have used across my career to develop a consistent—and enjoyable—writing routine. And while the primary audience for this blueprint are the (under)graduate affiliates in my lab, the insights are worth sharing with those who may find themselves at other universities and intellectual spaces, but still need templates to sample from to kick-start their own writing routines. Let's get started.

Ghosts in the Machine

We each, individually, have our own self-doubts, self-criticisms, and other fears. But if you're reading this, chances are you also have the intellect to do academic work (after all, you are earning, or did earn, your PhD). This latter part of your brain—with its intuitions, insights, and brawn—is what produces your ideas. But you can't generate those ideas if you are *also* doubting yourself, criticizing yourself, or constantly reliving previous traumas from life. From the perspective of latent variable modeling, think of your intellect as the underlying variable of interest. We need to be in the business of

harnessing the true variance associated with it, while compartmentalizing the variance that is error. In other words, we need to be aware of all the gunk that is uniquely part of us, but that contaminates our writing (i.e., error variance), while also consciously deploying a game plan that taps into our intellect (i.e., true variance).

I speak from experience with this. Writing was initially an albatross around my neck. I'm a highly identified Mexican American. My ethnic group is stereotyped as not exactly being the "shiniest apple in the orchard." And while I've had academic aptitude and talents since youth, it's still incredibly difficult not to let what others think about your ethnic group—which you strongly identify with—affect your individual performance in high-stakes situations like the academy.[1] This is an extensively documented phenomenon known as *stereotype threat*.[2] What should one do in this situation? There are several alternatives on offer, but the one I've followed is simply to change the things I can control and bracket or ignore the things that I cannot. Chief among the things that I control is my attitude toward writing.

WWA: Writing with Attitude

Having the right attitude is part of regular, productive, and enjoyable writing routine. And attitudes, psychologists tell us, are often driven by our interpretation and construal of the information in front of us.[3] In my mid-20s, the situation before me was

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[1] Ellemers, Naomi, Russell Spears, and Bertjan Doosje. 1997. "Sticking Together or Falling Apart: Ingroup Identification as a Psychological Determinant of Group Commitment versus Individual Mobility." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 72(3): 617-626.
[2] Steele, Claude M., and J. Aronson. 1995. "Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69(5): 797-811.
[3] Tourangeau, Roger, Lance J. Rips, and Kenneth Rasinski. 2000. *The Psychology of Survey Response*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

this: I wanted to compete in a domain—graduate school—where I was not expected to do so. Rather than infer I wasn't cut out to perform in this realm, I interpreted it as an invitation to prove my worth in this venue. While I acknowledge that hitching one's self-identity to one's work can be counter-productive for some people, as a member of a racially minoritized group, I don't have endless avenues to bolster my self-worth. Work—and outperformance in it—has regularly served for me as a surefire path to self-validation and dignity.

My general attitude is to view writing as a time-series process with high variance. That is, it is a highly variable process that unfolds over time, with lots of peaks and valleys. Given this interpretation, my job as a writer (at any stage in my career) is to minimize that variance while getting to the end of a process that can take days or weeks to complete: an abstract, an introduction to a paper, a written theory, or an entire manuscript or book. The attitude I take toward my own writing is this: I recognize that writing is a regular feature of my job; it doesn't have to be perfect the first time or ever; and it can always be improved through editing. This last point is essential to recognize. So much of great writing is revising, amending, and extending—it is *not* about producing blemish-free drafts in one try. If you allow yourself to see the act of writing as *requiring* messiness, then you become less inclined to treat the ebb and flow of the process as an indication of poor individual skill. Great writing is about jumping into the messiness, or, as I like to whisper to myself before I start my daily writing routine: "Let's make a mess and clean it up either later today or tomorrow."

Plan of Attack

If writing is so important, why do some of us approach it with little forethought? For reasons I am still trying to figure out, I and others have learned to view writing as linear and inspiration-driven. If I don't feel it, I can't write it. And if I don't write it perfectly, then neither I nor my product will be great. That's certainly one way to view one's job. It may even work for some individuals. But for most of us, I think it is also unrealistic. Great writing requires lots of preparation beforehand—and even then, it can still feel overwhelming and sloppy. My attitude toward this aspect of writing is that, much like running or lifting weights for one's long-term health, writing is about developing muscle memory so that you can continue optimizing performance across a long career. There will be days that feel like they are awful in terms of writing (and they might, in fact, be). There will also be days where everything clicked. And there will be days in-between these two alternatives. But the arc that connects these poles is a dynamic, over-time process. How to trigger this self-sustaining chain reaction? Here are the tactics I regularly use to establish and maintain my own writing routine.

Minutes and Hours

I sometimes get the sense that many graduate students believe that good writing demands long stretches of uninterrupted time. I'm not sure that's true. What good writing requires is predictability—or, to paraphrase Aaron Wildavsky, good writing requires that we do it "in the same place, at the same time, and in the same way."[4] A

[4] Wildavsky, Aaron. 1989. *Craftways: On the Organization of Scholarly Work*. New York: Routledge.

corollary to this is that your writing schedule can and should be adapted to changing circumstances in your life.

When I was a doctoral student with a dissertation to write ahead of me, my writing schedule consisted of early mornings until lunch time, typically 6:30am to 12pm. I was a newlywed without young children then and my wife had her own profession as a social worker. So, I treated my writing as a job, like my livelihood depended on it. I was also a rookie, which means I needed more time to practice this skill. There is nothing magical about (re-)writing and editing from 6:30am to noon, Monday through Friday. The magic comes from the predictability of the routine. Something was produced each day, irrespective of volume, quality, and sophistication—all attributes of writing that can be improved over time.

Did I have to write for this long each day? Probably not. But I didn't have anything in my life (e.g., children, pets, other obligations) to prohibit me from conflating time spent writing with its quality and volume. That slap in the face rudely came when our first child arrived. Picture this. A married couple where each individual works and has their own professional ambitions. Enter, next, a new infant who requires much time and attention. Now for the kicker: an absence of family support to reinforce the working parents' efforts at child-rearing. Something had to give.

In my case, this new obligation in life led me to begin my writing routine earlier than I was used to and to cut it down by about two-thirds. Essentially, most of my writing, both then and now, takes place between 4:30am and 7am, before anybody is up in my house. I sleep enough, even if it is not a luxurious length of time. Critically,

however, this daily routine lets me do an important part of my job, without making me feel I need to ignore the demands of my household. This does not mean I only work two hours each weekday. Rather, it means that, with rare exception, I prioritize my writing and get it done each day, however incrementally. Aggregating across weeks, actual product slowly starts to accumulate. This writing routine also lets me fan out to other daily tasks, which can include research design and analysis for other projects, teaching, mentoring, departmental service, and parenting.

One of the things that parenting taught me is to write in minutes, rather than hours. I used to treat writing as an all-or-nothing prospect. If I didn't have sequential, uninterrupted hours to write, then it wasn't worth engaging in this task at all. But there's nothing in the playbook that says the act of writing requires seemingly endless bandwidth. With less unstructured time as a new parent, I had to turn away from this now unrealistic standard. This means that sometimes there were pockets of time that I hadn't anticipate being free, so I seized them to work on *one* sentence or a *single* paragraph, all in the spirit of improving my content. Viewed in isolation, these moments might seem like they hardly move the needle on one's writing. Once you view these moments as a whole, it becomes obvious that chipping away at the task of writing is orders better than having it come to a complete standstill.

Brainstorms

Any severe storm leaves a mess in its wake. These messes can be cleaned up and, in doing so, often force individuals to think about how to rebuild stronger than before, so that they can better withstand the next disaster. That's what journalists often tell us

anyway, when they report on hurricanes, tornadoes, and earthquakes. And so it is with *brain*storms. These are the moments, sometimes planned, sometimes not, that leave a trail of debris in their wake. It's all so messy. But our jobs, as writers, is to cull from that mess those fragments that can help us build something stronger the next day and thereafter.

I undertake these brainstorms intentionally. I used to feel bad about myself for being so obsessive about the things that interested me intellectually. But in a way, it's our obsessive temperament that leads many of us into this profession. Own it and be intentional about it. Rather than viewing it as an intrusion, draw on it as a source of idea-generation. Once I understood that being obsessive about intellectual interests is, in fact, part of my job, I took small steps to systematize it. Now, when thoughts about my intellectual interests creep into my head throughout the day, I try to arrest them immediately and ask questions later. For example, if I'm around a pad of paper or post-it, I write it down so I don't forget. If I'm away from my desk, I create a note on my cell phone. When I'm back at my desk, I catalog them and see whether there's anything salvageable, something I can expand on. I keep the ones that are worth additional attention and keep writing what continues coming to mind about them. Usually, I think many things from different directions. Nothing in the playbook says your thoughts must be tightly organized from the beginning. It is when we edit that we give them coherence. This takes substantial work and should be acknowledged as such. This tactic works well for me, especially in the theory-building and research design stages of research, which eventually funnel into writing. Thinking about writing in spurts further

eases for me the stress of feeling I have to complete any writing-related task in one stretch on my initial try.

Keepsakes

The end goal of academic writing, usually, is a manuscript to submit for peer review. Assuming I have analyzed the data for a collection of studies, my first two questions to myself are: What story do these results tell? How does this story compare to the one I was hoping to tell? The answers to these questions are the raw ingredients for my paper. They delineate the parameters within which I can write.

The first outcome to produce within these boundaries, at least for me, is the abstract of a paper. An abstract is supposed to communicate to readers, with parsimony but essential detail, what your paper is about. Ironically, it should do the same for you as a writer. Writing an abstract helps me cut nature at the joints. In 200 words or less, writing an abstract forces me to boil down my idea to its bare bones: What is my research question? Why is it important that I answer it? How do I answer it? What is the evidence and how did I yield it? And, why does it matter that I answered this question? Writing all this in compact form pushes me to bring into view the skeleton of my idea and the paper behind it. If I can achieve this with a high degree of self-satisfaction, rather than perfection, it frees me to start the actual writing of the paper via its introduction.

These keepsakes—the abstract and introduction of a paper—will take time to produce. Just because an abstract is about 200 words doesn't mean it will be written in a day or a week. It's still writing—and it is hard. It takes consistent effort and revision

until you are satisfied with its content. How do you know you are done (for now)? When any further edits feel like you're re-arranging the chairs on a sinking *Titanic*. The same goes for the introduction of the paper. In fact, both the abstract and the introduction are often the only things a reader will closely pay attention to. So what you write—and, perhaps more importantly—how you write it is essential. Here, it's crucial to transition a bit from your role as intellectual to your role as salesperson. You have to sell the sizzle of your idea in an inviting and convincing way, both of which can be facilitated through lively writing.

Chunking and prioritizing

Thinking about writing a paper when one's frame of reference is a published article is a recipe for procrastination and inaction. A published paper is a good target to shoot for when you are willing to acknowledge that said paper most likely benefited from time, revision, and then more revision. To deal with the anxiety of producing a paper from whole cloth, I divide it into smaller chunks that I prioritize. The most essential here for me are the abstract and the introduction. Since I already discussed my view about the importance of an abstract, I will spend my time here explaining how I wrestle with producing an introduction.

These days, with many top journal's word limits and page constraints, the introduction of a paper is increasingly the most important part of a manuscript you write. It is often the part that a reader or reviewer will leaf through to get a summary sense of your research and then decide whether (and how carefully) they will read the rest of the manuscript. I can easily spend 2-3 weeks thrashing around with a coherent

draft of an introduction. To deal with the constraints alluded to above, I focus on writing an "introduction-as-literature review." This is an introduction of about 4-6 pages that explains what the paper does, why it is important do to so, and situates the contribution in the most relevant literatures to the question at hand.

Sometimes I start the introduction with a question, which I then justify in terms of its importance to specific audience. But not always. Sometimes I simply start an introduction by directly spelling out what the paper does, why it does it, and how it does it. This section must—absolutely must—hook in your reader to continue browsing through the remaining paragraphs. That's why writing an introduction can take so long. I generally aim to justify my paper's importance, not to myself (I'm already convinced), but to a non-specialist—someone who may not care about the proper nouns in my research, but is still in the market for a good story and competent social science.

The rest of my introduction focuses on the literature review. This literature review isn't supposed to demonstrate what you have read and what you know about it. Few people want to read that kind of prose. Instead, you want to be selective about the literatures you draw on. I do this by asking myself: what conceptual, theoretic, and/or empirical blind spots does my research attempt to take care of? My answers to one or all three of these questions determines which literatures I discuss. Typically, this discussion is one where I note the contribution(s) of a literature, while noting how it has led to the blind spot(s) my paper seeks to address.

The last part of my introduction summarizes in 1-2 paragraphs how my research clarifies those blind spots. Invariably, this often results in a compact discussion of my

research design, the analyses I under took, and—most importantly—what the findings are. Only essential details should be in this section. How do you know if something is essential? Ask yourself—if I remove this detail, does the house of cards I've written in this introductory section fall apart? If it is unlikely to crumble, don't include it.

The last section that gives me and many other writers grief is the theory section. There is a temptation to have this section be a re-hash of the literature review, often because we have not sufficiently disciplined and distilled our thoughts into coherence. Don't rehash your literature review. Instead, use the necessary time to discipline your thoughts in verbal and/or written form. Part of the stress behind this process is that we think we can keep it all organized in our heads as we juggle various threads of thought. We also, perhaps, tell ourselves that thinking isn't "real" work, because on the surface, it doesn't involve much physical strength. Both forms of thought are unhelpful and they are both easy to correct. In terms of juggling various strains of thought—write them down, organize them, flesh them out with additional notes or through drafts of prose. In terms of thinking-for-writing as not being real work, stop it. If this wasn't real work, some of us wouldn't find it as agonizing and anxiety-provoking. Instead, recognize it as work and treat it as such, perhaps by actually keeping your own timesheet and notes to empirically establish that you did actually work.

The insights, however rough, that emerge from your theory-building efforts will eventually serve as the main elements of research design, which your paper will have to describe. Walk your reader through the reasoning that led you to make the research design choices you made—what were the substantive reasons behind those? Why do

you use an experiment? Why does your experiment have a moderator or mediator? Spell it out. Your theory is the content you produce that fills some of the blind spots you identified and discussed earlier in your paper.

I think that as budding writers, we assume that if we write in an entertaining way, we lose our scientific aura. Gimme a break! Part of why we write our work and read the scholarship of others is for sheer intellectual entertainment. We should see our writing as an opportunity for creative expression, for the purposes of persuading other social scientists. I think the insight here that is often lost on many of us is the range of voices that already exist in the books and articles we read. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. If you enjoy reading the work of some academic(s) (irrespective of whether you are convinced by their reasoning), use it as a template to inspire your own written communication skills. For me, there are a few, but I'll focus on two authors who I think have an incredible gift for scientific story-telling: Donald Kinder (University of Michigan) and Paul Sniderman (Stanford University). Whatever you may think of the merits of their arguments in their published work, it's difficult not to be drawn into reading their work from start to finish. Whenever I need further inspiration for writing, I keep their books on my shelf and some of their papers on my computer and will re-read their introductions and appreciate the words they use, the sentences they employ, and how they organize all this into narrative form. Don't plagiarize, of course. But feel free to emulate. Remember, mimicry is a form of flattery.

Coda

What I have outlined in this brief essay are the attitude and tactics behind my own writing routine. The lessons here, are not the particulars of the process I undertake (e.g., *when* I write, *where* I write, etc.). Instead, the ultimate lesson is that writing takes planning, commitment, and regular attention, much like other aspects of our lives that we consider important. There is no shortcut here, except to give yourself the permission to practice your craft, make some errors, correct your mistakes, and become acclimated and comfortable with what is likely to be a constant feature of your own career.