**Asking EPSP:** How do you set and stick to writing goals? What strategies do you use to be the most effective writer you can be?

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"You should be writing."

These words probably sound familiar, and have run through your head once, twice, a thousand times in the past. Don’t worry, we’ve all thought them.

Writing is difficult for all of us. But, realistically, it also takes up a significant portion of our time as scientists. Probably even more than any of us thought when we first started down this path. Whether it’s writing proposals to fund new research, applications for new positions, or manuscripts to share our latest results with the community, we’re constantly putting pen to page (or fingers to the keyboard).

So how can we make this process as painless, guilt-free, and efficient as possible?

1. **Reflect on your process**

Different things work for different folks. Some people work better in short bursts, where others prefer longer, undisturbed chunks of writing time. What do you need to be the most effective writer you can be? Make sure to take these things into account when setting your writing goals and coming up with your writing plan.
Depending on what else you’re balancing, whether or not a deadline is looming, or the other stressors in your life at the moment, this process may change, but reflecting on those ebbs and flows can help you plan for future writing projects.

2. Schedule writing time
Waiting for inspiration to strike might mean you’re waiting a long time. Writing is a skill that takes constant practice. Just like other talents, like playing an instrument or a sport, you need to schedule time to practice and commit to that time.

Nicole Gasparini @NMGasparini · Feb 20
Still learning, but... schedule writing just like you do meetings. Set weekly goals and reward yourself when you make them. Know your style- if short bursts are better than long chunks, account for that.

You don’t have to write perfect prose every time you write. Putting ideas to paper is step one and it does not need to be fancy. Scribble by hand, write figure captions, stream of consciousness, the sky’s the limit!

Eli Lazarus @envidynxlab · Feb 20
Replying to @AGU_EPSP
With time so fragmented, I’ve found that writing fuels writing. Wait for perfect conditions & you’ll never start. So write in notebooks, scribble on scraps, feel good when you bank a solid paragraph you like - but make it a ~daily exercise. You WILL loosen up & your pace will 🚀.

Sometimes it’s easier to commit to writing time if it’s a group effort. Writing groups can be perfect ways to schedule writing time and hold yourself accountable.
Like to write alone and not in a room with other people? Try out a timer app to keep you focused during your scheduled writing time.

And of course, don’t forget to read! Reading scientific papers of any kind (the good, the bad, the ugly) can inform your own writing style. If you finish reading a paper that you feel was particularly good, take a minute or two to reflect on why it was good from a writing perspective. How was it organized? How did each section flow into the next and build on the previous? What type of diction did the authors use?

3. Come up with a plan
The structure of scientific papers can be daunting. In high school and college we are generally taught that the five-paragraph essay is the pinnacle of writing, but scientific manuscripts are nothing like the five-paragraph essays of yore. Coming up with a writing strategy can be helpful for piecing together a scientific manuscript. Don’t feel pressured to write in order. Sometimes it’s easiest to write the introduction last. Find an order that works for you and go for it.
A helpful way to visually outline your paper is to make your figures first. Figures are the meat of the manuscript, once you have them drafted you can begin to write around them. Think of them as the storyboard version of your manuscript or proposal.
Don’t be afraid to seek feedback early in the process. If you’re spinning your wheels, send a draft out for input! Better to do this earlier in the process, so your co-authors are in the loop and can solicit feedback, rather than you agonizing over details in isolation. Remember, co-authors should make meaningful contributions to the paper, so don’t be afraid to ask for help or input!

4. Be accountable
Whether you’re a graduate student, a post-doc, pre-tenure, or post-tenure, it can be really difficult to hold yourself accountable when scheduling out writing time. Everyone’s schedule is crammed and pushing writing time down the list of things to do can be all too easy, especially if there’s no formal deadline. One strategy for staying accountable is to band together with peers and colleagues to form an informal writing group.

For me, having a self imposed deadline for which I was accountable to others provided the motivation to actually get writing done, i.e. "I have to work on my intro because I promised I’d send it to everyone by 5 pm today". The idea came from my PhD advisor and (weirdly enough),

prior experiences with marathon training. There were so many training runs I would have bailed on if I hadn’t agreed to meet someone to run with. Same principle, easy to bargain with yourself, harder when others are involved.
If you can’t find writing buddies locally, look into online accountability groups. If you’re really motivated, you might organize a Slack channel or something similar with other colleagues where you can report your progress and check in with each other.

5. Reduce distractions
Some of us need complete silence to focus on writing, others need background noise, and others need a change of scenery. Incorporate your needs into your plan!
If your needs aren’t being met in your professional spaces, like a shared office or other communal workspace, don’t be afraid to advocate them. Just because you share a workspace, doesn’t mean that your ability to work effectively should suffer. If you can’t focus because of a chatty office-mate, start a dialogue with them. Usually, addressing this early and politely saves you a lot of stress and frustration, and helps to maintain a good working relationship with your office-mates and coworkers.
Setting some simple workspace ground rules, such as (1) each user feeling free to ask others to take prolonged conversations elsewhere (especially if not work-related), and (2) setting the expectation of early communications of lengthy Skype calls or work-related meetings in a shared space can go a long way.

If all else fails - noise cancelling headphones might do the trick!

Pair them with some ambient noise and you’re good to go.

Note: EPSP does not advise methods that may permanently damage your hearing! (But if it works for you…..)

6. Just start!
Do what you can to avoid staring at a blank screen. *The first version is never perfect,* and it doesn’t have to be! Once you release your expectations of perfection (we all have time), you’ll have a much easier time getting words on the page. And once you have words on the page, the easier it is to revise and refine and ease into the writing process.

This blog post was borne out of AGU EPSP’s new #WisdomWednesday initiative on Twitter. See the full tweet thread [here](https://twitter.com) and look out for future #WisdomWednesday posts!