Specious Barriers to Writing a Lot

Writing is a grim business, much like repairing a sewer or running a mortuary. Although I've never dressed a corpse, I'm sure that it's easier to embalm the dead than to write an article about it. Writing is hard, which is why so many of us do so little of it. If you're reading this book, you probably know how it feels to be thwarted. When I talk with professors and graduate students about writing, they always mention certain barriers. They want to write more, but they believe that there are things holding them back. I call these specious barriers: At first they appear to be legitimate reasons for not writing, but they crumble under critical scrutiny. This chapter looks at the most common barriers to writing a lot and describes simple ways to overcome them.

**Specious Barrier 1**

"I can't find time to write," also known as "I would write more if I could just find big blocks of time."
This spurious barrier is destined for academia's hall of fame. We've all used this one; some thwarted writers have elevated it to a guiding life theme. But this belief is spurious, just like the belief that people use only 10% of their brains. Like most false beliefs, this barrier persists because it's comforting. It's reassuring to believe that circumstances are against you and that you would write a lot if only your schedule had a few more big chunks of time to devote to writing. And your friends around the department understand because they have a hard time finding time to write, too. It's oddly soothing to commune with your colleagues, to bask collectively in the cold glow of frustration.

Why is this barrier spurious? The key lies in the word find. When people endorse this spurious barrier, I imagine them roaming through their schedules like naturalists in search of Time To Write, that most elusive and secretive of creatures. Do you need to “find time to teach”? Of course not—you have a teaching schedule, and you never miss it. If you think that writing time is lurking somewhere, hidden deep within your weekly schedule, you will never write a lot. If you think you won’t be able to write until a big block of time arrives, such as spring break or the summer months, then you’ll never write a lot. Finding time is a destructive way of thinking about writing. Never say this again.

Instead of finding time to write, allot time to write. Prolific writers make a schedule and stick to it. It’s that simple. Right now, take a few moments to think about the writing schedule that you want to have. Think about your week: Are there some hours that are generally free every week? If you teach on Tuesdays and Thursdays, maybe Monday and Wednesday mornings are good times to write. If you feel energized in the afternoon or evening, maybe later times would work well for you. Each person will have a different set of good times for writing, given his or her other commitments. The secret is the regularity, not the number of days or the number of hours. It doesn’t matter if you pick 1 day a week or all 5 weekdays—just find a set of regular times, write them in your weekly planner, and write during those times. To begin, allot a mere 4 hours per week. After you see the astronomical increase in your writing output, you can always add more hours.

When we talk about writing schedules, most people ask me about my schedule. (Some people ask defiantly, as if expecting me to shrug and say “Well, sticking to a schedule is easier said than done.”) I write Monday through Friday, between 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. I wake up, make coffee, and sit down at my desk. To avoid distractions, I don’t check e-mail, take a shower, or change my clothes before writing—I literally get up and start to write. The start and end times shift somewhat, but I spend around 2 hours writing each weekday. I’m not a morning person, but mornings work well for writing. I can get some writing out of the way before getting wrapped up in checking my mail and meeting students and colleagues who drop by the office.
Most people use a wasteful, unproductive strategy called binge writing (Kellogg, 1994). After intending to write, procrastinating, and feeling guilty and anxious about procrastinating, binge writers finally devote a Saturday to nothing but writing. This creates some text and alleviates the guilt, and the binge-writing cycle begins anew. Binge writers spend more time feeling guilty and anxious about not writing than schedule followers spend writing. When you follow a schedule, you no longer worry about not writing, complain about not finding time to write, or indulge in fantasies about how much you'll write over the summer. Instead, you write during your allotted times and then forget about it. We have better things to worry about than writing. I worry about whether I drink too much coffee or whether my dog drinks from the fetid backyard pond, but I don't worry about finding time to write this book: I know that I'll do it tomorrow at 8:00 a.m.

When confronted with their fruitless ways, binge writers often proffer a self-defeating dispositional attribution: “I'm just not the kind of person who's good at making a schedule and sticking to it.” This is nonsense, of course. People like dispositional explanations when they don't want to change (Jellison, 1993). People who claim that they're “not the scheduling kind of person” are masterly schedulers at other times: They always teach at the same time, go to bed at the same time, watch their favorite TV shows at the same time, and so on. I've met people who jogged at the same daily time, regardless of snow or rain, but claimed that they didn't have the willpower to stick to a daily writing schedule. Don't quit before you start—making a schedule is the secret to productive writing. If you don't plan to make a schedule, gently close this book, clean it so it looks brand new, and give it as a gift to a friend who wants to be a better writer.

You must ruthlessly defend your writing time. Remember, you're allocating time to write, not finding time to write. You decided that this time is your time to write. Your writing time is not the time to meet with colleagues, students, or graduate advisors; it isn't the time to grade papers or develop lectures; and it certainly isn't the time to check e-mail, read the newspaper, or catch the weather report. Close your Internet access, turn off your phone, and shut the door. (I used to hang a “Do Not Disturb” sign on my office door, but people interpreted this as “His door is closed, but he wants me to know he's in there. I'll knock.”)

Be forewarned that other people will not respect your commitment to your writing time. Well-intentioned intruders will want to schedule meetings with you, and they won't understand why you say no. They'll resent your inflexibility, call you rigid, and think that there's some deeper reason why you won't meet with them. For me, a common problem is that graduate students want to hold committee meetings at 9:00 a.m.—the time is convenient for them, but it's during my writing time. Likewise, I've been on some service committees in which the only time the whole group could meet was during my scheduled writing time.
How can you handle well-intentioned intruders? Just say no—that phrase might not keep you drug free, Nancy Reagan to the contrary, but it works for protecting your writing time. You have two good reasons for saying no. First, only bad writers will hold your refusal against you. I haven’t met a serious writer who didn’t respect my commitment to my writing time. They might be displeased that I can’t meet at their preferred time, but they appreciate that scheduling is the only way to write a lot. (These people also refuse to meet with me during their scheduled writing times.) The people who grumble and whine are the unproductive writers. Don’t get dragged into their bad habits. Second, the people who are happy to intrude on your writing time would never ask to intrude on your teaching time, your time that you spend with your family, or your sleeping time. They simply see your writing time as less important. As an academic psychologist, you’re a professional writer, just as you’re a professional teacher. Treat your scheduled writing time like your scheduled teaching time. So say no to well-intentioned intruders, and explain why you can’t (not won’t, but can’t) break your committed writing time. If you feel bad about saying no, then lie. If you feel bad about lying, then use the obscurantism you learned in grad school: Claim a “recurring intractable obligation” or a “previously encumbered temporal placement.”

Always write during your scheduled time, but don’t be dogmatic about writing only within this time. It’s great if you keep writing after the period is over or if you do some writing on a nonwriting day—I call this windfall writing. Once you harness the terrible power of habit, it’ll be easier for you to sit down and write. Beware, however, of the temptation to usurp your writing schedule with windfall writing. It doesn’t matter how much you wrote over spring break—you committed to your scheduled time, and you’re going to stick to it. If you find yourself saying absurdities like “I wrote a lot over the weekend, so I’ll skip my scheduled period on Monday,” this book can help: Close it, hold it between the thumb and index finger of your nondominant hand, and wave it menacingly in front of your face.

Perhaps you’re surprised by the notion of scheduling. “Is that really the trick?” you ask. “Isn’t there another way to write a lot?” Nope—making a schedule and sticking to it is the only way. There is no other way to write a lot. After exhaustively researching the work habits of successful writers, Ralph Keyes (2003), a professional writer, noted that “the simple fact of sitting down to write day after day is what makes writers productive” (p. 49). If you allot 4 hours a week for writing, you will be surprised at how much you will write. By surprised, I mean astonished; and by astonished, I mean dumbfounded and incoherent. You’ll find yourself committing unthinkable perversions, like finishing grant proposals early. You’ll get an invitation to revise and resubmit a paper, and you’ll do it within a week.
You’ll be afraid to talk with friends in your department about writing out of the fear that they’ll think, “You’re not one of us anymore”—and they’ll be right.

**Spacious Barrier 2**

“I need to do some more analyses first,” aka, “I need to read a few more articles.”

This spacious barrier, perhaps the most insidious of all, has wreaked a lot of havoc. At first, this barrier seems reasonable. “After all,” you might say, “you can’t write a journal article without doing statistics or reading a lot of articles.” True, but I’ve met some unproductive writers who chant this spacious barrier like a mantra. Their colleagues respect them at first, believing them to be perfectionists or obsessive data analysts. But they never write much, and they never do those analyses, either. Binge writers are also binge readers and binge statisticians. The bad habits that keep them from writing also keep them from doing the _prewriting_ (Kellogg, 1994), the reading, outlining, idea generation, and data analysis necessary for generating text. Like all spacious barriers, this one doesn’t withstand a close look.

It’s easy to pull away this creaky crutch: Do whatever you need to do during your allotted writing time. Need to crunch some more statistics? Do it during your scheduled time. Need to read some articles? Do it during your scheduled time. Need to review page proofs? Do it during your scheduled time. Need to read a book about writing to get advice? You know when to do it. Writing is more than typing words: Any action that is instrumental in completing a writing project counts as writing. When writing journal articles, for example, I often spend a few consecutive writing periods working on the analyses. Sometimes I spend a whole writing period on ignominious aspects of writing, like reviewing a journal’s submission guidelines, making figures and tables, or checking page proofs.

This is another reason why scheduling time to write is the only way to write a lot. Professional writing involves a lot of components: extensive literature reviews, careful analyses, and precisely worded descriptions of research methods. We will never “find the time” to retrieve and read all of the necessary articles, just as we’ll never “find the time” to write a review of those articles. Use your scheduled writing time to do it. You’ll no longer feel stressed about finding time to read those papers or do those analyses, because you know when you’ll do it.

**Spacious Barrier 3**

“To write a lot, I need a new computer” (see also “a laser printer,” “a nice chair,” “a better desk”).

Of the spacious barriers, this is the most desperate. I’m not sure that people really believe this one—unlike the other spacious barriers, this may be a mere excuse. A personal story might dispel this barrier. When I started writing seriously during graduate school, I
bought an ancient computer from a fellow student's boyfriend. This computer was prehistoric even by 1996 standards: no mouse, no Windows, just a keyboard and WordPerfect 5.0 for DOS. When the computer died, taking some of my files with it to its grave, I bought a portable computer that I typed into the ground. I'm writing this book on a slow, tottering Toshiba laptop that I bought back in 2001—in computer years, my laptop is collecting Social Security.

For nearly 8 years, I used a metal folding chair as my official writing chair. When the folding chair retired, I replaced it with a more stylish but equally hard vintage Eames fiberglass chair. It's a simple chair: It lacks upholstery and padding, and I can't adjust the height or make it tilt. For the curious, Figure 2.1 shows where I wrote this book. There's a big, simple desk (note the lack of drawers, keyboard trays, fancy hanging-file systems, and so on) with a laser printer and a coaster for my coffee. Before I splurged on this Blu Dot desk, I had a $10 particleboard folding table, which in a nod to fashion I covered with a $4 tablecloth. I wrote most of my book about interest (Silvia, 2006) and around 20 journal articles sitting on my folding chair in front of that folding table.

Unproductive writers often bemoan the lack of "their own space" to write. I'm not sympathetic to this creepy excuse. I've never had my own room as a home office or private writing space. In a string of small apartments and houses, I wrote on a small table in the living room, in my bedroom, in the guest bedroom, in the master bedroom, and even (briefly) in a bathroom. I wrote this book in the guest bedroom in my house. Even now, after writing all those books and articles and after buying a house, I still don't have my own space at home to write. But I don't need it—there's always a free bathroom.

I've heard a surprising number of binge writers complain about printers as barriers to writing. "If only I had a laser printer at home," they complain, with wistful yearning in their voices. They don't realize that you can't print articles like you print money—a printer only outputs what you sat down and wrote. I love my laser printer, and serious writers should buy a good one, but they're inessential. When T. Shelley Duval
and I wrote our book about self-awareness (Duval & Silvia, 2001), I had a Stone Age inkjet, and he didn't have a printer. It takes a long time to print a book on an inkjet printer; we eventually printed our drafts in cyan and maroon when the black ink ran out.

When unproductive writers complain that they don't have fast Internet access at home, I congratulate them on their sound judgment. A close look at Figure 2.1 shows that there's no Internet cable plugged into the computer. My wife has fast Internet access in her home office, but I don't have anything. It's a distraction. Writing time is for writing, not for checking e-mail, reading the news, or browsing the latest issues of journals. Sometimes I think it would be nice to download articles while writing, but I can do that at the office. The best kind of self-control is to avoid situations that require self-control.

“In order to write,” wrote William Saroyan (1952), “all a man needs is paper and a pencil” (p. 42). Equipment will never help you write a lot; only making a schedule and sticking to it will make you a productive writer. If you won't take my word for it, consider a recent interview with Bill Stumpf. A legend in the world of furniture design, Stumpf designs products for the Herman Miller Company, a leader in high-end office furniture. Stumpf is best known for codesigning the Aeron chair, perhaps the coolest office chair ever made. But as a writer of books himself (Stumpf, 2000), he knows that furniture can only do so much. “I'm not sure there is a direct correlation between a piece of furniture and productivity,” he said, adding, “I'm sure Herman Miller wouldn't want to hear me say that” (Grawe, 2005, p. 77).

**SPEIOUS BARRIER 4**

“I'm waiting until I feel like it,” aka “I write best when I'm inspired to write.”

This final specious barrier is the most comical and irrational. I hear this one a lot from writers who, for whatever incomprehensible reason, resist making a writing schedule. “My best work comes when I’m inspired,” they say. “It’s no use trying to write when I’m not in the mood. I need to feel like writing.” It’s funny when thwarted writers say this. It’s like cigarette addicts defending cigarettes by saying that smoking relaxes them, even though nicotine withdrawal causes the feelings of tension in the first place (Parrott, 1999). When struggling writers defend their unwillingness to make a schedule, they’re sticking up for the cause of their struggles. If you believe that you should write only when you feel like writing, ask yourself some simple questions: How has this strategy worked so far? Are you happy with how much you write? Do you feel stressed about finding time to write or about completing half-finished projects? Do you sacrifice your evenings and weekends for writing?

It's easy to demolish this specious barrier: Research has shown that waiting for inspiration doesn't work. Boice (1990, pp. 79–81) conducted a study with
profound implications for every binge writer who waits for inspiration. He gathered a sample of college professors who struggled with writing, and he randomly assigned them to use different writing strategies. People in an abstinence condition were forbidden from all nonemergency writing; people in a spontaneous condition scheduled 50 writing sessions but wrote only when they felt inspired; and people in a contingency management condition scheduled 50 writing sessions and were forced to write during each session. (They had to send a check to a disliked organization if they didn’t do their writing.) The dependent variables were the number of pages written per day and the number of creative ideas per day. Figure 2.2 shows what Boice found. First, people in the contingency management condition wrote a lot: They wrote 3.5 times as many pages as people in the spontaneous condition and 16 times as much as those in the abstinence condition. People who wrote “when they felt like it” were barely more productive than people told not to write at all—inspiration is overrated. Second, forcing people to write enhanced their creative ideas for writing. The typical number of days between creative ideas was merely 1 day for people who were forced to write; it was 2 days for people in the spontaneous condition and 5 days for people in the abstinence condition. Writing breeds good ideas for writing.

Some kinds of writing are so unpleasant that no normal person will ever feel like doing them. What kind of person feels enthusiastic about writing a grant

FIGURE 2.2. Effects of different writing strategies on (a) the number of pages written per day and (b) the modal number of days between creative writing ideas. Data are from Boice (1990, p. 80).
proposal? Who wakes up in the morning with an urge to write about “Specific Aims” and “Consortium/Contractual Arrangements?” Writing a grant proposal is like doing your taxes, except that you can’t pay your accountant to do it for you. If you have moods where you’re griped by a desire to read the Department of Health and Human Services Grants.gov Application Guide SF424 (R&R), then you don’t need this book. If you’re like everyone else, though, you’ll need more than “feeling like it” to finish a grant proposal.

Struggling writers who “wait for inspiration” should get off their high horse and join the unwashed masses of real academic writers. The ancient Greeks assigned muses for poetry, music, and tragedy, but they didn’t mention a muse for journal articles written in APA style. As academics, we’re not creating high literature. We don’t have fans lurking outside the conference hotel hoping for our autographs on recent issues of the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin. We do technical, professional writing. Some kinds of academic writing are more relaxed—like textbooks, or perhaps this book—but even those kinds of writing boil down to imparting useful information to your readers. Our writing is important because it’s practical, clear, and idea driven.

Ralph Keyes (2003) has shown that great novelists and poets—people who we think should wait for inspiration—reject the notion of writing when inspired. The prolific Anthony Trollope (1883/1999) wrote that there are those . . . who think that the man who works with his imagination should allow himself to wait till—inspiration moves him. When I have heard such doctrine preached, I have hardly been able to repress my scorn. To me it would not be more absurd if the shoemaker were to wait for inspiration, or the tallow-chandler for the divine moment of melting . . . I was once told that the surest aid to the writing of a book was a piece of cobbler’s wax on my chair. I certainly believe in the cobbler’s wax much more than the inspiration. (p. 121)

How do these great writers write instead? Guess. Successful professional writers, regardless of whether they’re writing novels, nonfiction, poetry, or drama, are prolific because they write regularly, usually every day. They reject the idea that they must be in the mood to write. As Keyes (2003) put it, “Serious writers write, inspired or not. Over time they discover that routine is a better friend to them than inspiration” (p. 49). One might say that they make a schedule and stick to it.

Conclusions

This chapter has cast a cold, critical eye on some common barriers to writing. We’ve all indulged in these comfort blankets, but it’s hard to type when you’re wrapped in a blanket. If you still cling to any of these specious barriers, reread this chapter until you have been indoctrinated into the glorious wonders of scheduling. This book cannot help you unless you
accept the principle of scheduling, because the only way to write a lot is to write regularly, regardless of whether you feel like writing. Once you have developed a writing schedule, read the next chapter. It describes simple motivational tools for sticking to your schedule and for writing more efficiently.

3

Motivational Tools

The previous chapter demolished some false reasons for not writing. Its message was clear: Write according to a schedule. Schedules are why prolific writers are so prolific, and they are how anyone can write a lot. But perhaps you're not getting much done during your scheduled time: You sit down, coffee and computer at hand, but you're not sure what to write. Reformed binge writers usually don't know how to manage their writing time. Because they used to be driven by deadlines and guilt, they lack experience in setting goals, managing several writing projects at once, and sticking to their schedule. This chapter describes some tools for enhancing your motivation and your writing productivity. These tools presuppose that you're writing according to a schedule. If you haven't picked a schedule and committed to it yet, then you can add binge stubbornness to your bingeing repertoire.
SETTING GOALS

Like businesspeople, academics enjoy talking about goals. Some academics are so enamored of goals, initiatives, and strategic plans that they become deans and provosts. Goals deserve the attention they get. Clear goals are directly motivating—they enable people to plan, carry out instrumental actions, and feel proud when the goal has been accomplished (Bandura, 1997). Without clear goals, people’s actions are diffuse and undirected (Lewin, 1935). To write a lot, you need to clarify your writing goals. This isn’t as easy as it sounds; people’s plans often go awry because of inadequate goal setting. Developing the right kinds of goals will make you a more efficient writer.

So how do you set good goals? The first step is to realize that goal setting is part of the process of writing. It’s a good idea to devote a writing session to developing and clarifying your writing goals; I usually do this once a month. Planning is part of writing, so people who write a lot also plan a lot. The second step is to list your project goals—these goals are the individual projects that need to be written. Examples include revising and resubmitting a paper, starting a new manuscript, writing an invited chapter for an edited book, reviving that half-done paper you started last year, developing a grant proposal, and writing a book.

What do you want to write? When reformed binge writers first set writing goals, one project always leaps out—usually the dreaded project they had been avoid-

ing for the past 3 months. Certainly write that goal down, but don’t stop there. What else would you like to write during the next few months? Is there a grant proposal deadline on the horizon? Does your file cabinet have any unpublished experiments that deserve a good peer-reviewed home? Is there a review article that you always meant to write? Put down this book, get some paper, and make a sprawling, discursive list of your project goals.

After you settle on a list of project goals—and it might be a long list—you need to write these goals down. It’s a waste of your writing time to rehash the planning process. Get a whiteboard or bulletin board, put it near your writing space, and proudly display your list of goals. A binge writer would feel anxious when confronted with this long list of projects, but you have a schedule. Binge writers ask, “Will I get all this done?” disciplined writers idly wonder how many weeks it will take to write everything on the list. It’s gratifying to cross a project goal off the list. You can use happy-face stickers if that’s more your style.

The third step is to set a concrete goal for each day of writing. When you sit down during your writing time to work toward a project goal, you need to break the goal into smaller units. “Resubmit that paper” is fine as a project goal, but it’s too broad to be useful when you sit down to write. When you start your writing period, take a couple of moments to think about what you want to accomplish that day. “Write that paper” is too general; you need a concrete goal.
for that day. Here are some examples of concrete daily goals:

- Write at least 200 words.
- Print the first draft I finished yesterday, read it, and revise it.
- Make a new list of project goals and write them on my whiteboard.
- Write the first three paragraphs of the general discussion.
- Add missing references and then reconcile the citations and references.
- Reread chapters 22 and 24 from Zinsser (2001) to recharge my writing batteries.
- Finish the “Setting Goals” section that I started yesterday.
- Brainstorm and then make an outline for a new manuscript.
- Reread the reviewers’ comments of my paper and make a list of things to change.
- Correct the page proofs and mail them back.

Some people are surprised by goals that refer to numbers of words or paragraphs. Remember, these are concrete goals. It’s hard to get a foothold into an abstract goal like “revise and resubmit that paper,” but it’s easy to understand how to write at least 200 words—you sit down and type. The irrepressible Anthony Trollope, writing with watch at hand, had the concrete goal of 250 words every 15 minutes (Trollope, 1883/1999). Get in the habit of setting specific, focused, concrete goals for each writing day. They’ll prevent confusion about what to do and how to do it.

**SETTING PRIORITIES**

By now, you have a list of project goals. Of all of these projects, what should you write first? I asked my colleagues who write a lot how they set writing priorities. Here’s a sample list—it’s a rough average between my own priorities and the typical set of priorities. Use it as an example and write down your own priorities, perhaps next to your list of project goals.

1. **Checking page proofs and copyedited manuscripts.** This appears as nearly everyone’s top writing priority, and for good reasons. Checking proofs is the final stage in the process of publishing, and unlike much of the world of academic writing, there’s a firm deadline. Publishers need you to review page proofs and copyedited manuscripts fast, usually within 48 hours. After all the months (or years) spent collecting the data and writing the manuscript, why would you hold up your own paper? Do this fast.

2. **Finishing projects with deadlines.** Most writing tasks lack deadlines, so projects that have a due date should receive priority over those that don’t. Projects with deadlines include invited book chapters, grant proposals, and administrative writing. Some of these deadlines are firm—most grant agencies won’t consider proposals that are a mere day late—
and others are mushier. Personally, I don’t have this as a priority category, because I don’t rub against deadlines like I used to. If you follow a writing schedule, you’ll finish things early. A binge writer’s biggest motivator, deadlines are nearly irrelevant to disciplined, scheduled writers.

3. Revising manuscripts to resubmit to a journal. Most manuscripts get rejected. If you have the good fortune to be asked to resubmit your paper, don’t squander it. Revised manuscripts are closer to publication than new manuscripts, so they should receive higher priority.

4. Reviewing manuscripts and grant proposals. This is a controversial category; I found little agreement among my colleagues regarding where reviews should fall in the priority list. Some thought reviews should be a high-priority nonwriting task, one worth doing quickly but not during scheduled writing time. Others were indifferent toward reviews and tended to put them off. For what it’s worth, I place reviews relatively high. The peer review process is only as good as the peers who review. The review process in psychology is too slow, and this hurts the field’s scientific mission. If everyone were a faster reviewer, everyone would be a happier author. Writing reviews quickly also wins you the goodwill of editors, who are constantly exasperated by slow reviewers. The same holds for grants: A lot is at stake with grant reviews, so they’re worth doing quickly and well.

5. Developing a new manuscript. Published papers start with the first draft of a manuscript. Writing a manuscript from the ground up is hard for binge writers: They spread it out over months, and they do their literature reviews and data analyses in binges, too. Writing new manuscripts is relatively easy (compared with grants, books, and revised manuscripts) when you follow a schedule. Chapter 6 gives helpful tips for writing empirical papers.

6. Doing miscellaneous writing. This is a catch-all category for unimportant writing that still needs to be done, like a brief article for a newsletter. It helps to have some fun side projects that you can tinker with when you have a lull in your major writing projects.

Nearly everyone I surveyed mentioned that they place particular priority on writing projects involving graduate students. They might usually devote their time to a resubmission, for instance, but they’ll privilege a new manuscript when a graduate student is a coauthor. This is sound advice. I also give priority to projects in which I’m a nonwriting coauthor. Ever write a first draft, send it to the second and third authors for comments and changes, and never hear back from them? It’s maddening to be held up by a
slow coauthor, especially when he or she doesn’t have the burden of generating much text. Binge writing is bad, but binge coauthoring is worse.

Graduate students should have different writing priorities than faculty. This priority list was developed by talking with successful graduate students and recent graduates.

1. **Projects with deadlines.** Graduate school involves a lot of deadline writing, such as required papers for classes and seminars. Many students complain that their class assignments soak up writing time that could be spent on more significant projects, like a master’s thesis. That’s true, but deadlines are deadlines, and these papers are good practice for the real world of academic writing. Also, if you need more time to write, simply add more hours to your weekly writing schedule. Grant proposals—such as fellowships that support graduate training—also have deadlines, and they’re well worth the effort.

2. **Curricular writing.** In graduate school, you’ll have writing projects that define your school’s degree program: typically a master’s thesis, a comprehensive or qualifying paper, and a dissertation. You need to do these to graduate, so do them quickly. These projects sometimes yield publishable products, so many students can integrate their curricular tasks with real professional writing.

3. **Professional publications.** Scientific research counts only if it’s published in an accessible, peer-reviewed outlet. It’s great that you finished your thesis and that your committee liked it, but the world’s scientists need to be able to access it and scrutinize it. Strong theses and dissertations should be submitted to professional journals. Moreover, you should aspire to publish more than your thesis and dissertation. Take every opportunity to get involved in research projects and writing projects. If you make a writing schedule, you’ll be the most prolific student in your program.

4. **Other writing.** Graduate students often do a surprising amount of miscellaneous writing, like reviewing books and contributing to bulletins and newsletters. Like all writing, this writing is good practice and worth the time. But these projects are less important than peer-reviewed, archived professional publications such as journal articles and book chapters. If faced with two options, always make professional writing a higher priority.

When we talk about setting priorities, people commonly ask, “But what if I have nothing to write?” It’s rare that professors have nothing to write. To the contrary, most faculty I know have a dark, vast backlog of unpublished data. Collecting data is easy; writing about data is hard. If you have experiments that you ran 10 years ago but never published, it’ll be a while
before you have nothing to write. Moreover, writing begets writing. As Boice (1990) found, people who wrote regularly had more creative ideas for writing compared with people who wrote only when they felt like it (see chap. 2). If you think you have nothing to write, spend a writing period making a new set of project goals.

Graduate students, however, can realistically find themselves without a current writing project. Perhaps you just wrapped up your thesis and have no other projects, or perhaps you just started graduate school. Fear not: You have two good options. First, get involved in an ongoing writing project. Your advisor, like most professors, probably struggles with writing and has a few stalled writing projects. Wander into his or her office and say “I’ve been reading some books about how to be a better writer, and one of them suggested wandering into your office and asking if I could get involved in some writing projects. If you have any manuscripts that need work or some data that need to be submitted, I’d like to help out.” There’s a realistic possibility that your advisor will sputter incoherently. Faculty wish that graduate students took more initiative in research and writing, so your advisor will be pleased that you want to get involved.

Another way you can deal with not having anything to write is to use your scheduled writing time for your professional development. One of the best tips I ever got in grad school was to “always make time to think.” Grad school is hectic; it’s easy to lose sight of your long-range goals when you’re struggling to manage a lot of short-term deadlines. Having a few hours to yourself each week will give you time to read books about writing and teaching, to reflect on your research, and to think about your broader career goals.

**Monitoring Progress**

Most people have no idea how much—or how little—they’re writing. Because they view themselves in a flattering, self-enhancing light, most people think that they’re writing more often and more efficiently than they are. To write a lot, you need to take a cold, accurate look at your writing by monitoring your writing progress. Research on self-regulation shows that it isn’t enough to set a goal and make it a priority: People must monitor their progress toward the goal (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Duval & Silvia, 2001).

Monitoring your writing progress has many good motivational effects. First, watching your progress keeps your goals salient, which prevents them from slipping away. Many people struggle with managing all the things they have to write. Monitoring your writing will keep you focused on your ongoing project. Second, merely monitoring your behavior will help you sit down and write. Behavioral research shows that self-observation alone can cause the desired behaviors (see Korotitsch & Nelson-Gray, 1999). For example, people who want to save money should keep track of their daily expenses, because the mere tracking
of their spending will make them spend less. Likewise, people who want to write regularly should keep track of whether they sat down and wrote: Typing a big ugly zero in a spreadsheet when you miss a writing period is oddly motivating. Finally, monitoring your writing will help you set better goals. After a while, you’ll have enough data on yourself to make realistic estimates of how long it will take to write something. Better goal setting, in turn, leads to more productive writing.

People who write a lot typically do some kind of monitoring. There are different ways to do this; in this section I describe how I monitor my writing. When I tell people about my system they give me an odd look, as if I had just said that I make quilts out of Bernese mountain dog hair. The system sounds nerdy, obsessive, and weird, but it helps me stay focused. I have an SPSS data file called “Writing Progress.sav”; Figure 3.1 gives a screenshot of the file. I created variables for the month, date, day of the week, and year. These variables let me identify a given day. The essential variables are called words, goal, and project. In the words column, I enter the number of words I wrote that day. Any word processor will give you the number of words in your document; just get this number before you start and after you finish, and you can take the difference. Notice that this column has a lot of empty cells. As I’ve emphasized, writing involves many tasks, not just generating text. Some days I spend reading articles, filling out forms for a grant proposal, or rereading a
manuscript that needs to be resubmitted. I leave the cell blank for these days. The purpose of the goal column is to mark whether I met my writing goal for that day. My personal goal is simply to sit down and do something that furthers my project goal, so I score this variable as \(0 = \text{Unmet}, \ 1 = \text{Met}\). I did pretty well during the period shown in Figure 3.1; I failed to meet my goal on July 5, but I met it on the other days. The project column describes the project goal I worked on that day. Recording the project lets you see how long it took to finish a project. Sometimes it feels like a project drags on forever, but it may have been briefer than you remember.

Binge writers who are still clinging to spurious barriers might say “But I don’t have SPSS,” or even “But I use SAS!” Any statistics or spreadsheet program will do, and I’m sure you have access to lined notebook paper and pencils. The tracking is the key, not the technology. But a statistics program lets you mine your writing data. If you’re a statistics fan—and who isn’t—you’ll love the ability to get statistics about your writing. I wrote a short SPSS syntax file that computes some descriptive statistics and histograms. When I spent a period writing new text, I averaged 789 words per day; Figure 3.2 shows a histogram. It doesn’t sound like a lot, but it adds up. Figure 3.3 plots goal by month; this figure shows that some months were better than others. According to my writing data, I sat down to write on 97% of my scheduled days during the past 12 months. I’m not perfect, but I’m pretty happy with that number. Monitoring it lets me try to improve it, and I feel proud when I get 100% for the month. If you’re curious, you could also plot goal and words data by day of the week. So, when people ask me how much I write, I can say I write 97% of the weekdays, and when I generate text I average 789 words per day. They might give me the Bernese-mountain-dog-quilt look, but that’s okay.
Reward yourself when you finish a project goal. Self-reinforcement and contingency management are time honored ways of fostering desirable behaviors (Skinner, 1987). When you submit a paper or grant proposal, buy yourself a nice cup of coffee, a good lunch, or a vintage Heywood-Wakefield end table. Writing's rewards are delayed—it takes months to hear from journal editors and grant panels—so immediate self-rewards will sustain your motivation. Only a fool, however, rewards productive writing with skipping a scheduled writing period. Never reward writing with not writing. Rewarding writing by abandoning your schedule is like rewarding yourself for quitting smoking by having a cigarette. The writing schedule works by harnessing the awesome powers of routine and habit. Don't lose your good writing habits.

**What About Writer's Block?**

"Wait," you might say. "So far, this book hasn't said anything about writer's block. Sure, you can make a schedule, set goals, and monitor your progress, but what happens when you get writer's block?" I love writer's block. I love it for the same reasons I love tree spirits and talking woodland creatures—they're charming and they don't exist. When people tell me they have writer's block, I ask, "What on earth are you trying to write?" Academic writers cannot get writer's block. Don't confuse yourself with your friends teaching creative writing in the fine arts department. You're not crafting a deep narrative or composing metaphors that expose mysteries of the human heart. The subtlety of your analysis of variance will not move readers to tears, although the tediousness of it might. People will not photocopy your reference list and pass it out to friends whom they wish to inspire. Novelists and poets are the landscape artists and portrait painters; academic writers are the people with big paint sprayers who repaint your basement.

Writer's block is a good example of a dispositional fallacy: A description of behavior can't also explain the described behavior. Writer's block is nothing more
than the behavior of not writing. Saying that you can't write because of writer's block is merely saying that you can't write because you aren't writing. It's trivial. The cure for writer's block—if you can cure a specious affliction—is writing. Recall Boice's (1990) experiment described in chapter 2. In that study, struggling writers wrote a lot when they simply followed a schedule—that's all it took. In contrast, struggling writers who waited until they “felt like it” wrote almost nothing. If you really have writer's block, you can (a) stop working on your Collected Poems and get back to writing your journal article, (b) persuade the tree spirits and talking woodland creatures to write your general discussion for you, or (c) redevelop your writing schedule and recommit to sticking to it.

Just as aliens abduct only people who believe in alien abductions, writer's block strikes only writers who believe in it. One of the great mysteries of the writing schedule system—a spooky mystery, in fact—is that scheduled writers don't get writer's block, whatever that is. Prolific writers follow their writing schedule regardless of whether they feel like writing. Some days they don't write much—writing is a grim business, after all—but they're nevertheless sitting and writing, oblivious to the otherworldly halo hovering above their house.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter has described motivational tools that will make you a more productive writer. After you've committed to a writing schedule, you need to make a list of your project goals and write them down. When you sit down to write, spend a minute thinking about what you want to do that day. Setting priorities among your project goals will take the stress out of managing several projects at once. And monitoring your writing will keep you focused on your goals, motivate you not to miss a day, inform you about how well you're doing, and give you hard facts that you can show to your binge-writing colleagues who are doubters and unbelievers. Anyone who combines the tips in this chapter with a regular schedule will write a lot.
A Brief Foray Into Style

Our academic journals radiate bad writing—I store my journals on the shelf farthest from my desk to avoid the fallout. But if you talk with the authors of these disastrously written articles, you'll find that they're enthusiastic about their work. Their spoken descriptions are often clear, lively, and interesting. What went wrong? This book is about writing a lot, not about writing well, but you should take the time to learn the principles of strong writing. People can write a lot after a mere week if they commit to following a schedule, but it takes much longer to learn how to write well—all the more reason to start now. This chapter provides a handful of tips for improving the quality of your writing.

**Diagnosing the Problem**

Academic writers are bad writers for three reasons. First, they want to sound smart. “If the water is dark,” goes a German aphorism, “the lake must be deep.”
Instead of using good words like smart, they choose sophisticated or erudite. I ought to have said, “Bodies of water characterized by minimal transparency are likely to possess significantly high values on the depth dimension (p < .05).” Second, academic writers never learned how to write well. Their role models during graduate school were probably bad writers, and their role models in the journals set the Geiger counters clicking. Finally, most academics don’t spend enough time writing to become good writers. As with any other skill, writing skill comes from many hours of deliberate practice (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). People must learn the rules of good writing and spend hundreds of hours practicing those rules.

To solve the first problem, you must revise your mental model of academic writing. Some readers might think you’re smart if your writing is impenetrable, but you don’t want that undiscerning audience. Most scientists are impressed by good ideas and interesting findings, so don’t hide your ideas behind a wall of junk English. To solve the second problem, read this chapter and then buy some books about writing. At the back of this book is a list of references about style and grammar that you’ll find helpful (see “Good Books About Writing”). To solve the third problem, read those books and practice their suggestions during your scheduled writing time. It won’t be long before your sentences sound more like you and less like an anonymous, desiccated academic.

**Choose Good Words**

Writing begins and ends with words. To write well, you need to choose good words. The English language has a lot of words, and many of them are short, expressive, and familiar — write with these words. Avoid trendy phrases that sound intellectual, and never use words that make you sound like an academic psychologist. Besides improving your writing, good words show respect for your many readers who learned English as a second, third, or fourth language. Foreign scholars often read articles with a dual-language dictionary at hand. If a word isn’t in that dictionary, your foreign readers won’t understand it. They’ll blame themselves for misunderstanding your writing, but you’re to blame for leaving them behind.

“But what about technical terms?” you might ask. “How can I write a paper about stimulus onset asynchrony without saying ‘stimulus onset asynchrony’?” Science coins words and phrases when it needs them—these technical terms do useful work. When defined with normal words, technical terms are easy to understand. We should keep our good science words and exclude the bad words that emigrate from business, marketing, politics, and warfare: We don’t need verbs like to incentivize or to target, and only window washers need adjectives like transparent. For coherence, use technical terms consistently. Varying terms for psychological concepts will confuse your readers:
Before: People high in neuroticism responded slower than people low in the tendency to experience aversive affective states.

After: People high in neuroticism responded slower than people low in neuroticism.

But some technical terms are terrible, so don’t mindlessly write the words you see in professional journals. Developmental psychologists, content with neither path nor way, describe developmental pathways; in vaunted moments, these pathways are trajectories. Cognitive psychologists should clarify what disambiguate means. Clinical psychologists have clients who present with symptoms, presumably like depressed butlers carrying platters of “negative moods” and “poor sleep.” And clinicians don’t write manuals or follow manuals anymore; they develop and implement manualized interventions. Emotion psychologists, fearing their readers’ ignorance of the meaning of appraisal, speak of cognitive appraisals, subjective appraisals, and—in case someone missed the point—subjective cognitive appraisals. Psychologists with interdisciplinary interests propose biosocial models, psychosocial models, psychobiological models, and even biopsychosocial models; a recent biopsychosocial/spiritual model surpasses parochial models that are merely biopsychosocial.

Psychologists love bad words, although they call them deficient or suboptimal instead of bad. Psychologists like writing about the existing literature. Is there a nonexistent literature that I should be reading and referencing? Any psychologist who reads articles should know that our professional journals are frighteningly real. Extant literature is a white-collar version of the same crime. Psychologists who write about a disconnect between two things have become disconnected from their dictionaries, where they’ll find good words like difference, distinction, separation, and gap. And some individuals, when writing individual papers on various individual topics, refer to a person as an individual and to people as individuals. These people forget that individual is vague: Consider “We observed an individual ______.” Should the blank be filled with a noun (e.g., rabbit) or with a verb (e.g., walking)? You don’t say individual and individuals when discussing research with your friends, so why be so shoddy when describing it to the vast world of science? Were you attracted to psychology because you were interested in individuals and enjoyed individuals-watching? Choose good words, like person and people. The abomination persons should remain the property of small-town sheriffs on the hunt for “a person or persons unknown.”

Speaking of people, I stopped writing participants when describing my research participants. I have friends who study birds, infants, rats, and school districts; their participants are nothing like mine. I study adult humans, so person and people are good words for my Methods sections. If this decision shocks you, fear not—unlike fashion, APA style lacks police. Participants is a vague word, so psychologists should choose better words. Some researchers, for example, study children by collecting data from children, teachers,
and parents. People in all three groups are participants, so the word is uninformative: Call them children, teachers, and parents. If you study cognitive processes in older and younger adults, why not describe your methods and results using older adults and younger adults? In the privacy of your own room, rewrite a Methods section by replacing the word participants with a better word. You’ll feel better.

Abbreviations and acronyms are bad words. I’ve seen writers abbreviate short, familiar words like anxiety (ANX) and depression (DEP), add acronyms for simple phrases like anxious arousal (ANXAR) and anhedonic depression (ANDEP), and then gleefully describe the differences between ANX, ANDEP, DEP, and ANXAR. Abbreviations and acronyms are useful only when they are easier to understand than the tortuous phrases they represent. SES and ANOVA are good; ANX and DEP are bad. Some writers believe that they’re reducing redundancy by replacing common phrases with abbreviations. In a book about how to write a lot, for example, they would rather repeat WAL than write a lot. Readers find rereading abbreviations more tedious than rereading real words. By not writing tortuous phrases in the first place, you’ll reduce the need for abbreviations.

Delete very, quite, basically, actually, virtually, extremely, remarkably, completely, at all, and so forth. Basically, these quite useless words add virtually nothing at all; like weeds, they’ll in fact actually smother your sentences completely. In Junk English, Ken Smith (2001) called these words parasitic intensifiers:

Formerly strong words are being reduced to lightweights that need to be bulked up with intensifiers to regain their punch. To offer insight or to oppose a position now sound tepid unless the insight is valuable and the opposition diametrical. The intensifier drains the vigor from its host. (p. 98)

If you took to heart Strunk and White’s (2000) command to “omit needless words” (p. 23) but can’t tell which words are needless, parasitic intensifiers are basically begging to be totally eliminated.

**Write Strong Sentences**

Now that you’re self-conscious about your words—“Did I write individuals in my last paper?”—it’s time to rethink how to write sentences. “All this time you have been writing sentences,” wrote Sheridan Baker (1969), “as naturally as breathing, and perhaps with as little variation” (p. 27). By overusing a single type of sentence, bad writers sound like they’re speaking in a discursive drone. English has three types of sentences: simple, compound, and complex (Baker, 1969; Hale, 1999). Simple sentences have only one subject–predicate pair. Academic writers scorn clear, simple sentences. It’s a shame. Compound sentences have two clauses, and each clause can stand alone. Sometimes a conjunction connects the independent clauses;
sometimes a semicolon does the trick. Unlike simple and compound sentences, complex sentences contain dependent and independent clauses. Complex sentences, if written well, give your writing a crisp, controlled tone.

In egocentric moments, I believe that parallel sentences were invented for psychologists. We write about relationships, contrasts, and comparisons: people high in extraversion and people low in extraversion, the control condition and the experimental condition, what happened at Time 1 and what happened at Time 2. Good writers use parallel sentences because parallel structures easily express relationships; bad writers avoid them because they think that parallel structures are repetitive. Instead, bad writers create skewed sentences by varying their terms and sentence types:

**Before:** People in the dual-task condition monitored a series of beeps while reading a list of words. Some other participants in a different group read only a list of words without listening for sounds (“control condition”).

**After:** People in the dual-task condition monitored a series of beeps while reading a list of words. People in the control condition read a list of words.

Some parallel sentences use a criterion-variant structure: They describe what is shared and then describe the variations.

**Better:** Everyone read a list of words. People in the dual-task condition monitored a series of beeps while reading the words, and people in the control condition only read the words.

**Better:** Everyone viewed a set of 20 pictures. In the control condition, people merely viewed the pictures. In the evaluation condition, people rated how much they liked each picture.

Many people are estranged from the semicolon, a good but neglected friend to writers of parallel sentences. Like their dislike of jocks and the yearbook club, many writers’ distrust of semicolons is a prejudice from high school. Work through this—you need semicolons. Semicolons must connect independent clauses; each part of the sentence must be able to stand alone. Unlike a period, a semicolon implies a close connection between the clauses. Unlike a comma followed by and, a semicolon implies a sense of balance, of weighing one and the other. Semicolons are thus ideal for coordinating two parallel sentences:

**Before:** At Time 1, people read the words. At Time 2, they tried to remember as many words as possible.

**After:** At Time 1, people read the words; at Time 2, they tried to remember as many words as possible.

**Before:** People in the reading condition read the words, and people in the listening condition heard a recording of the words.

**After:** People in the reading condition read the words; people in the listening condition heard a recording of the words.

While you’re rebuilding your relationship with the semicolon, reach out and make a new friend—the
dash. Good writers are addicted to dashes. Technically called em dashes—they’re the width of a capital M—dashes enable crisp, striking sentences. Dashes have two common uses (Gordon, 2003). First, a single dash can connect a clause or phrase to the end of sentence. You’ve read a lot of these in this chapter:

- Our academic journals radiate bad writing—I store my journals on the shelf farthest from my desk to avoid the fallout.
- Work through this—you need semicolons.
- While you’re rebuilding your relationship with the semicolon, reach out and make a new friend—the dash.

Second, two dashes can enclose a parenthetical expression. You’ve read these, too:

- Now that you’re self-conscious about your words—“Did I write individuals in my last paper?”—it’s time to rethink how to write sentences.
- Technically called em dashes—they’re the width of a capital M—dashes enable crisp, striking sentences.

Try using dashes for your next Participants and Design section:

Okay: Forty-two adults participated in the experiment. There were 12 women and 30 men.

Better: Forty-two adults—12 women and 30 men—participated in the experiment.

The em dash has a lesser known cousin, the en dash. The width of a capital N, the en dash coordinates two concepts. It’s a clean way of expressing between. Few writers use en dashes properly; they use hyphens instead, often with embarrassing results. Developmental psychologists interested in parent-child behavior probably don’t mean that parents act like babies sometimes—they mean parent-child, a shorthand for “behavior between parents and children.” Good writers know the difference between a teacher-parent conference (en dash) and a teacher-parent conference (hyphen). A researcher on my campus posted flyers for an “infant-parent interaction study.” (Forget teen pregnancy—let’s stop infant pregnancy.) Now is a good time to thank the valiant copyeditors who have silently corrected en dash errors in your published papers.

You can write strong sentences by experimenting with appositional phrases. Because the positions of phrases in a sentence imply relationships, you can eliminate words that connect and coordinate parts of the sentence.

Before: Counterfactual thoughts, which are defined as thoughts about events that did not occur, demonstrate the intersection of cognition and emotion.

After: Counterfactual thoughts, defined as thoughts about events that did not occur, demonstrate the intersection of cognition and emotion.

Better: Counterfactual thoughts—thoughts about events that did not occur—demonstrate the intersection of cognition and emotion.
Before: The study of facial expressions is a popular area within the study of cognition and emotion, and it has settled old conflicts about the structure of emotions.

After: The study of facial expressions, a popular area within the study of cognition and emotion, has settled old conflicts about the structure of emotions.

Finally, you can diagnose weak sentences by checking for two common maladies that strike academic writing. The first, the such that virus, afflicts writers who fear simple sentences. To avoid writing a simple sentence, they use such that to connect a flabby first clause with the second clause that they meant to write. Never write such that again. Use your word processor’s search function to stamp out this pestilence. If you find it, there are three cures: delete the clause preceding such that, replace such that with a colon or dash, or write a better sentence.

Before: We created two conditions such that people in one condition were told to be accurate and people in another condition were told to be fast.

After: People in one condition were told to be accurate; people in another condition were told to be fast. (Dropped the preceding clause, used a semicolon to create parallel clauses.)

After: We created two conditions: People in one condition were told to be accurate, and people in another condition were told to be fast. (Replaced such that with a colon.)

Before: People were assigned to groups such that the assignment process was random.

After: People were randomly assigned to groups. (Wrote a better sentence.)

The second malady, the wobbly compound syndrome, afflicts writers who erroneously believe that commas should mark pauses in speech. Our journals are battling a pandemic of wobbly compound syndrome. Some examples of casualties follow:

- Positive moods enhance creative problem solving, and broaden thinking.
- Experiment I demonstrated strong effects of planning on motivation, and clarified competing predictions about how planning works.

Recognize the symptoms? Know why these are wrong? Compound sentences require two independent clauses. In wobbly compounds, the second clause can’t stand alone because it lacks a subject: What broadens thinking? What clarified predictions? It’s easy to fix these sentences. You can add a subject to the second clause ("and they broaden thinking," "and if clarified competing predictions") or you can omit the comma ("Positive moods enhance creative problem solving and broaden thinking.")

**Avoid Passive, Limp, and Wordy Phrases**

All books about writing urge people to write in the active voice. People think actively and speak actively, so active writing captures the compelling sound of everyday thought and speech. Passive writing, by hiding
the sentence's doer, strikes people as vague and evasive. Writers who want to sound smart drift toward the passive voice; they like its impersonal sound and its stereotypical association with scholarly writing. Passive writing is easy to fix. Read your writing, and circle each appearance of the infinitive to be. Can you think of a better verb? Nearly all verbs imply being, so you can usually replace to be with dynamic verbs. Change at least one third of your original uses of to be. With vigilance and practice, you'll write fewer passive sentences. To revive enervated sentences, negate with verbs instead of with not. People often miss not when reading and thus misunderstand your sentence. This trick shortens your sentences and expresses your points vividly.

Before: People often do not see not when reading and thus do not understand your sentence.

After: People often miss not when reading and thus misunderstand your sentence.

Some of psychology's common phrases are aggressively, proudly passive. In any journal, you'll find psychologists "ivving it up": Their results are indicative of significance, the theory is reflective of its historical context, the data are supportive of the hypothesis. This is passive writing at its most flamboyant and unapologetic: The writer chose an awkward, passive form instead of a common, active form. Why not say the results indicate, the theory reflects, the data support? Delete all to be ______ive of phrases by rewriting the verb:

- to be indicative of = to indicate
- to be reflective of = to reflect
- to be supportive of = to support
- to be implicative of = to imply

I have a memory of reading is confirmative of—a false memory, I hope.

Only vigilance will stop wordy phrases from slithering into your sentences. I recently read an article that claimed that attitudes are emotional in nature. If attitudes are emotional in nature, what are they like in captivity? Will they reproduce like captive pandas? Psychologists who write in nature probably saw the movie Out of Africa too many times during their formative years. Unless you plan to submit your article to National Geographic, avoid in nature. Adjectives describe the natures of things, so in nature is always implied in an adjective. After this rant, I needn't describe why in a ______ manner is bad. Use adverbs—"people responded rapidly" instead of "people responded in a rapid manner"—to avoid a tragedy of manners.

Even active sentences can be limp and lifeless. Psychologists often start a sentence with "Research shows that . . .", "Recent studies indicate that . . .", "Many new findings suggest that . . .," or "A monstrous amount of research conclusively proves that . . .". These phrases add little to your meaning, and citations at the end of the sentence will show that research bolsters your point. You'll need these phrases
occasionally—I use them in this book to contrast empirical facts with personal opinions—but avoid them when possible.

Writers hobble strong sentences by starting with lumpy phrases like “However . . . ,” “For instance . . . ,” and “For example . . . .” Move however into the first joint of the sentence:

Before: However, recent findings challenge dual-process theories of persuasion.

After: Recent findings, however, challenge dual-process theories of persuasion.

Relocate for example and for instance as well, but (in informal writing) keep but and yet at the start of the sentence. As an aside, remember that a poorly punctuated however can turn a compound sentence into a glorious run-on.

Before: High self-efficacy enhances motivation for challenging tasks, however it reduces motivation if people perceive the task as easy.

After: High self-efficacy enhances motivation for challenging tasks; however, it reduces motivation if people perceive the task as easy.

Write actively, but don’t feel overwrought when you write passive sentences. Like all scientific writing, psychological writing involves impersonal agents such as concepts, theories, constructs, and relationships. We often have weak agents, such as past research, cognitive dissonance theory, or the cognitive approach to anxiety disorders. When readers can’t easily form a mental image of the subject and its action—a theory making predictions, a concept correlating with another concept, a tradition influencing modern research—active sentences lose their punch. One solution to weak subjects—one favored by writers on a misguided quest to avoid anthropomorphism—is to replace impersonal agents like cognitive dissonance theory with researchers, as in researchers studying cognitive dissonance theory. I doubt that this helps. Vague subjects like researchers and people interested in are equally abstract, impersonal, and hard to imagine. And this approach can be misleading: Sometimes we’re writing about cognitive dissonance theory, not about people who study it.

WRITE FIRST, REVISE LATER

Generating text and revising text are distinct parts of writing—don’t do both at once. The goal of text generation is to throw confused, wide-eyed words on a page; the goal of text revision is to scrub the words clean so that they sound nice and make sense. Some writers—invariably struggling writers—try to write a pristine first draft, one free of flaws and infelicities. The quest for the perfect first draft is misguided. Writing this way is just too stressful: These writers compose a sentence; worry about it for 5 minutes; delete it; write it again; change a few words; and then, exasperated, move on to the next sentence. Perfectionism is paralyzing. Furthermore, writing sentence by sentence
makes your text sound disjointed. The paragraph, not
the sentence, is the basic unit of writing.

Master the rules of style, but don’t let those rules
paralyze you when you sit down to write. Revising
while you generate text is like drinking decaffeinated
coffee in the early morning: noble idea, wrong time.
Your first drafts should sound like they were hastily
translated from Icelandic by a nonnative speaker. Writing
is part creation and part criticism, part id and part
superego: Let the id unleash a discursive screed, and
then let the superego evaluate it for correctness and ap-
propriateness. Rejoice in writing your gnarled and im-
penetrable drafts, just as you rejoice in later stamping
out your fuzzy phrases and unwanted words.

CONCLUSIONS
This chapter sought to make you self-conscious about
your writing. Many individuals display inaccurate self-
assessments of their deficient writing skill levels—or to
realize how badly they write” (p. 19). Strong, clear
writing will make your work stand out from the crowd
of shoddy, obtuse, pretentious, and mediocre manu-
scripts and grant proposals. People respect good writ-
ing. Reviewers of grant proposals know that clear writ-
ing requires clear thinking; journal editors appreciate
a clean description of a good idea. Read some of the
books listed in the back of this book, practice the
principles of good writing when you generate and revise
text, and never write individuals or such that again.

Writing Journal Articles

Psychology journals are like the mean jocks and aloof
rich girls in every 1980s high school movie—they
reject all but the beautiful and persistent. Writing a
journal article combines all the elements that deter
motivation: The probability of success is low; the likeli-
hood of criticism and rejection is high; and the out-
come, even if successful, isn’t always rewarding. Doing
research is fun; writing about the research is not. De-
spite this, we must write journal articles because sci-
ence communicates through its journals. Conferences
are great for meeting old friends and seeing what fellow
researchers are doing, but conference presentations are
neither peer reviewed nor archived. Publication is the
natural end point of the process of research.

The field’s file cabinets are full of unborn articles.
I know many researchers who have a shameful backlog
of data; some have unpublished data from the 1980s
that they “hope to publish someday.” Sure they will.
Because psychology venerates journal articles above
other forms of publication, the field has good ressources
that help beginning writers learn how to publish journal articles (e.g., American Psychological Association [APA], 2001; Sternberg, 2000). Most of those resources, however, have failed to address the hard motivational problems involved in writing articles. This chapter gives a practical and personal look at writing journal articles. It provides tips for writing stronger articles and advice for writing in the face of inevitable criticism and failure. The advice in this chapter won’t make you love writing articles, but it will help you write more of them with less dread.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR WRITING AN EMPIRICAL ARTICLE

Writing a journal article is like writing a screenplay for a romantic comedy: You need to learn a formula.

As odd as it sounds, you should be grateful for APA style. Once you learn what goes where—and what never goes where—you’ll find it easy to write journal articles. If you don’t own the latest Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2001), you should buy it.

Outlining and Prewriting

On my list of maladaptive practices that make writing harder, Not Outlining is pretty high—just above Typing With Scratchy Wool Mittens, just below Training My Dog to Take Dictation. Outlining is writing, not a prelude to “real writing.” Writers who complain about “writer’s block” are writers who don’t outline. After trying to write blindly, they feel frustrated and complain about how hard it is to generate words. No surprise—you can’t write an article if you don’t know what to write. People who write a lot outline a lot. “Clear thinking becomes clear writing,” said Zinsser (2001, p. 9). Get your thoughts in order before you try to communicate them to the world of science.

Writing an outline lets you make early decisions about your paper. How long do you want your paper to be? How much attention do you want to give to past research? Should this paper be a short report or a full-length research article? Most of these decisions are between you and your research, but I encourage you to be concise. After many years of bloated articles crowding the journals, psychology is moving toward
shorter articles. Some prestigious journals publish only short articles (e.g., Psychological Science), and many others have recently created short reports sections. Short is good. Think about how you feel when you read journal articles. Do you wish that they would end sooner, or do you wish that the authors would keep their momentum going for another 14 pages? Don’t cram everything into one paper. You can write a lot of papers in your career, so you can work an omitted idea into another paper or develop it into a paper of its own.

An inner audience—an image of who will read your paper—will help you with your writing decisions. How thoroughly should you describe competing theories of visual attention? Should you explain a statistical method, or should you assume that most readers will understand it? Other professionals in your area—the professors and graduate students who share your research interests or wish to learn more about the topic—are the biggest part of your audience. Write for this audience. Smaller groups within your audience include undergraduate students, journalists, people working in related fields, and a few eclectic readers (e.g., bloggers and humorists). Many of your readers speak English as a second or third language; keep them in mind when you’re tempted to choose trendy, vapid words. To refine your inner audience, make a rough list of the journals that you would want to publish your paper. Journals such as Journal of Experimental Psychology: General and Psychological Science have broad audiences; other journals, such as Visual Cognition and Self and Identity, attract audiences of specialists. When writing for specialists, you can assume that your readers know the field’s theories, findings, and methods. And write your paper with a smooth, professional tone. Your goal is to sound like a normal person with something worthwhile to say—don’t be too serious or too casual.

The Title and Abstract

Most readers who cross your article will see only the title and abstract, so make them good. A title must balance generality and specificity: Say what your article is about, but don’t be so specific that your article sounds technical and tedious. If tempted to write a trendy, topical, or comical title, think about how it will sound in 10 years. Will future researchers get the joke? In the digital age, readers find your article with electronic databases that store and search titles and abstracts. Include all the search keywords in your abstract that you want to yield your article. For my research on self-awareness, for example, I use synonyms like self-focus, self-focused attention, and self-consciousness in the abstract. It seems that nearly everyone writes the title and abstract last, so follow the herd.

Introduction

Your introduction conveys the significance or triviality of your research. Of the parts of your article, the introduction is most likely to be read instead of skimmed
or skipped. As a result, it’s the section that writers fear most. Some people warn beginning writers that there’s no formula for an introduction (e.g., Kendall, Silk, & Chu, 2000). Nonsense—of course there’s a formula. Good writers use a good formula; you’ll recognize it.

- Start your introduction with an overview of the article, which should be only one or two paragraphs. In this overview, describe the general problem, question, or theory that motivated the research. The goal of this section is to justify the article’s existence, to interest the reader, and to provide a framework that will help the reader understand the rest of the article.

- After your overview, start with a heading that introduces the second part of your introduction. The heading might resemble your title. This second section is the body of the introduction: Here you describe relevant theories, review past research, and discuss in more detail the question that motivated your research. Use headings and subheadings as signposts. If there are two theories, for instance, create a subheading for each one. Keep the second section focused on the problem you described in the first section.

- After the second section, write a heading called The Present Experiments or The Present Research. Thus far, you have given an overview of your problem (section 1) and reviewed the necessary theories and findings (section 2). By now, the reader understands your question’s context and significance. In this third section, describe your experiments and explain how they answer this question—it might take one to four paragraphs, depending on the level of detail. Conclude this section with the heading that begins your Method section (Method or Study 1).

This formula introduces the reader to your problem (section 1), reviews theories and research relevant to the problem (section 2), and clearly states how your research will solve the problem (section 3). It leads the reader down a clear path, and it keeps the writer from straying into irrelevant areas. You’ll find exceptions to this formula—for short reports, a single section with no headings might suffice—but it will serve you well for most of your papers.

Your introduction should introduce the research, not exhaustively review everything anyone has ever said about your problem. Brief reports may have crisp 2- to 3-page introductions; mammoth manuscripts submitted to journals that indulge windy writers may have 12- to 20-page introductions. When writing normal research articles, keep your introduction under 10 manuscript pages.

**Method**

Method sections aren’t glamorous, but they reveal how carefully you conducted your research (Reis, 2000). A good method section allows another researcher to
replicate your study. Like introductions, method sections follow a formula. Your method section will have several subsections. The first, Participants or Participants and Design, describes the size and characteristics of the sample and, for experiments, the experimental design. If your study involved equipment—such as physiological equipment, unusual software, response pads, or voice-activated response switches—you'll need a subsection called Apparatus. A Measures subsection is helpful for research that involved sets of scales, tests, and assessment tools, such as neurocognitive tests, interest inventories, and self-report measures of attitudes or individual differences.

After these subsections, you have the Procedure subsection, the heart of your method section. In this section, describe what you did and said. Reviewers pay close attention to the procedure subsection, and you don't want to look like you're hiding something. Provide a lot of detail about your independent variables and dependent variables. Your rhetorical goal is to connect your procedures with the procedures used in published articles. If your experiment used a manipulation that has been used before, cite representative past experiments, even if the manipulation is well-known. If you invented the manipulation, cite research that used similar manipulations or research that implies that your manipulation is reasonable. If your independent variable involved classifying people into groups (e.g., low and high social anxiety), describe the basis for the classification (cutoff scores, norms, conventions) and cite past research that used the same classification basis. Connecting your procedures to past research allays concerns about the validity of your methods.

Reviewers want to know how you measured your dependent variables. If your dependent variables are well established, cite articles that developed or used the scales. For professional tests, cite the test manuals as well as recent articles that used the tests. If your dependent variables were ad hoc, such as self-report items that you wrote, list each item and cite a paper that used similar items. For self-report scales, list the scale values—for example, 7-point scales can be 1 to 7, 0 to 6, or −3 to +3—along with any labels that anchored the scale (e.g., 1 = not at all, 7 = extremely). If your dependent measures were physiological or behavioral, briefly describe past research that supports the construct validity of your measure.

Papers that report a series of studies can save space by reporting variations from the first experiment's methods. If all three experiments used the same apparatus, for instance, you needn't describe the apparatus three times. When describing the later experiments, just say that they used the same equipment.

Results

The Results section describes your analyses. Beginning writers feel compelled to report every possible analysis of their data, probably because thesis and dissertation committees want to see such analyses. Journal articles
should be crisp: Report only the results that bear on your problem. Bad results sections are long lists of numbers and statistical tests; good results sections create a story (Salovey, 2000). First, start your results section with analyses that inform the integrity of your study. This section might report the internal consistency of self-report scales, estimates of interrater agreement, analyses of manipulation checks, or the method of data reduction and treatment.

Second, describe your analyses in a logical sequence. There’s no one way to do this—it depends on your methods and hypotheses—but try to cast your central findings into bold relief. Salovey (2000) suggested reporting your most interesting and important findings first. When describing results, don’t mindlessly report test after test. For each test, remind the reader of your hypothesis, report the statistics, and then discuss what the tests mean. “But discussions of findings are for the general discussion!” protest beginning writers. This is a misunderstanding of what people learned in their undergraduate research methods classes. The results section isn’t an exclusive club for numbers only. Don’t just report a one-way analysis of variance and say it was significant. Describe your prediction, report the test, and describe what the findings mean. Which group was higher than the other? Was the pattern consistent with your prediction?

Third, use tables and figures to reduce the clutter of numbers that afflicts most results sections. My most common comment as a manuscript reviewer is, “The authors should present the descriptive statistics in a table.” For experimental designs, make a table that presents the means, standard deviations, and cell sizes. To go the extra mile, include 95% confidence intervals—reviewers will appreciate your openness, and readers will be able to compute their own analyses of your data. For correlational designs, make a table that presents the means, standard deviations, sample sizes, confidence intervals, estimates of internal consistency, and a correlation matrix. With that information, a reader can create and test structural equation models of your data (Kline, 2005). There’s no law against presenting data in both a figure and a table: The figure is for readers who want to see the pattern of data, and the table is for readers who want the dirty details.

**Discussion**

If your paper has several studies, a Discussion section follows each results section. These sections are narrower than the general discussion. They summarize the study’s findings and discuss how the study informs the paper’s central problem. Discussions should also address limitations in the experiment, such as unexpected results or problems with the procedure. Consider creating a Results and Discussion section if your discussion section merely summarizes the results.

**General Discussion**

The General Discussion steps back and looks at your findings in light of other theories and past research.
Start your general discussion with a brief overview of your problem and your findings: One or two paragraphs will usually be enough. Good general discussions have little in common—your problem, methods, and research area will dictate what you ought to discuss—except that they are usually short. Think about how you read general discussions. Do you skim them, skip them, or complain about the author’s fruitless discussion of every minor aspect of the research? Try to keep the general discussion shorter than the introduction. If you like, conclude the general discussion with a one paragraph summary of the entire article.

Your undergraduate research-methods teacher told you to end your general discussion with a section on limitations; your thesis committee probably wanted this section, too. Describing limitations is a useful educational exercise, but it’s often pointless in an article intended for a professional journal. Some limitations are generic to all research. Yes, it would have been nice to have a larger and more representative sample; yes, it would have been nice to have included even more measures; yes, it’s conceivable that a future study that uses different measures with a larger sample will find a different pattern of results. Don’t insult your audience—everyone knows that these limitations inhere in all research. Other limitations are generic to an area of research. Cognitive psychologists know that they use contrived computer-based tasks; social psychologists know that they use convenience samples of undergraduates. Specialists know that your research shares the area’s generic limitations. Don’t waste time stating the obvious. Instead, devote space to limitations specific to your research. But don’t merely raise your study’s limitations—raise them and then make a good case for why they aren’t as grim as they look.

References

Your References section documents the sources that influenced the ideas in your paper. By embedding your work within the field of science, your references say a lot about how you view your research. Be selective—you needn’t cite everything you read on the topic, and you should never cite books or articles that you haven’t read. Scholars who have read those articles can tell that you cribbed the reference from another source. Although not as glamorous as an introduction or as brawny as a results section, a reference section deserves to be done well. As a reviewer, I see a lot of sloppy reference sections. Lazy writers often commit grievous crimes against APA style and fail to include references for articles cited in the text. “What’s the big deal?” some would say; “They’re just references.” Your friends down the hall can see your sloppy reference list; the critical, anonymous peer reviewers should see your best work.

Seasoned writers use their references to increase the odds of getting desired reviewers. When editors consider possible reviewers for your paper, they often flip to the references to see whom you cited. I’m not sure if this
trick works, but it probably can't hurt. Also, cite your past work in your new manuscripts. Self-citations strike some writers as shameless self-aggrandizement. I've met writers, invariably beginners, who were reluctant to cite themselves. Citing your past work connects your latest article with your stream of work. If someone is interested enough in your work to read your latest article, he or she would probably be interested in reading your other articles, too. Self-citations make it easy for readers to learn about them.

**Submitting Your Manuscript**

Your manuscript is ready to be submitted to a journal when it's clear, well-written, and as perfect as possible. If you think "I'll just send it now and clean it up later when I resubmit it," stop thinking and start revising. Only masochists submit rough drafts to journals. Pristine manuscripts grab the attention and respect of reviewers and show the editor that you're a serious professional who can be counted on to do revisions quickly and thoroughly. Before submitting your pristine manuscript, read the instructions to authors posted on the journal's Web site. Read these directions closely, because journals have different submission guidelines. Most journals accept electronic submissions, either by e-mail or through a Web-based submission portal.

Regardless of how you submit your manuscript, you'll need to write a cover letter to the editor. Some people write a simple, standard letter; others write an extended exegesis on the merits and importance of the manuscript. I asked some friends who have edited major journals about their preferences. They unanimously preferred a simple letter with the essential boilerplate: the name of the manuscript, the author's mailing and electronic addresses, and the standard assurances that the manuscript isn't under review elsewhere and that the data were collected according to the field's ethical standards. One person, an associate editor, noted that he often didn't read the author's cover letter because the submission portal made it hard to retrieve. Another told me that she wanted to be persuaded by the manuscript, not by a letter about the manuscript.

In your cover letter, you can suggest possible reviewers and request that certain people not serve as reviewers. I've heard from editor friends that they're more likely to honor the "do not review" list than the friends and cronies list. Perhaps one of the associate editors at the journal would be perfect for reviewing your manuscript. If you like, you can ask the editor to assign the manuscript to that associate editor. (Although I've made this request several times, my manuscript was never assigned to that person.)

**Understanding Reviews and Resubmitting Your Manuscript**

While idly leafing through old issues of *Child Development*, I read an editorial from the early 1970s. The
editor described the peer review process and mentioned that the average response time was 6 weeks. Think about this. Thirty years ago, an author mailed a stack of hard copies to an editor, who in turn mailed the copies to reviewers. After composing their comments on typewriters, the reviewers stamped and mailed their reviews. The editor typed an action letter, saving a carbon copy for the files, and then mailed the letter and reviews to the author. Today’s authors, editors, and reviewers correspond electronically, often through sophisticated Web-based portals that manage the submission, send reminders to reviewers and editors, and eliminate all delays due to postal mail. Thank technology while waiting for your reviews.

When the editor’s action letter arrives, he or she will usually summarize the key points made by the reviewers and state a decision about the manuscript. The decision can take three forms: The manuscript has been accepted, the door is open for a resubmission, or the door is closed.

- Acceptance decisions are easy to interpret. The editor says the manuscript has been accepted and tells you to complete some forms; sometimes the editor accepts a manuscript pending minor changes. It’s rare that the first submission of a manuscript is accepted. Even when they like the manuscript, editors usually want authors to shorten it or add information. Some editors occasionally accept manuscripts with no changes required—one more reason to submit strong first drafts.
- When the door is open, the editor is willing to consider a revised version of your manuscript. This category ranges from encouraging letters that imply likely acceptance to discouraging letters that imply a long slog of revision. Wide-open doors involve easy changes, such as rewriting parts of the text or adding information. Barely open doors involve effortful changes, such as collecting more data and rethinking the conceptual basis for your research. Sometimes, editors say that they’ll treat heavily revised manuscripts as new submissions.
- When the door is closed, the editor never wants to see your manuscript again. Sometimes, closed-door rejections encourage you to submit your manuscript elsewhere; other times, the editor mails you a personal shredder for destroying all known copies of the manuscript. If the door is closed, don’t antagonize the editor by resubmitting the manuscript.

Even seasoned researchers are often uncertain if an editor is willing to consider a revised version of a manuscript. The word reject doesn’t necessarily mean that you can’t resubmit the manuscript. Many editors use reject to refer to any manuscript that they aren’t accepting. They can reject your first draft but intend to accept a revised draft. I suspect that some conflict-
averse editors use discouraging open-door letters to brush off authors—"We're happy to consider a revised manuscript that includes three new experiments and a rewritten Introduction and General Discussion." When uncertain, show your reviews to a friend or write a brief e-mail to the editor to ask for a clarification.

If the door is open for resubmission, consider whether you're willing to do the work. An editor might want new data, new analyses, and extensive rewriting. Is the project worth the effort? Your default decision should be to do the work necessary for resubmission. Remember that all journals have high rejection rates. By receiving an invitation to resubmit the manuscript, you have cheated the gods of rejection rates. If the journal is prestigious, you should do the effortful changes, such as adding another experiment. If the manuscript is low in priority, you might want to send it elsewhere instead of devoting more time to data collection.

After you commit to revise and resubmit your manuscript, you need to make a plan for your revision. Examine the editor's letter and the reviews and extract the action points. (Don't say actionable points—it's a slippery slope to abominations like drinkable and doable.) Action points are targets for change. Read the editor's letter and the reviews, and underline each comment that implies a change. It might be a change in the text—adding something, deleting something, rewording something—or a change in the analyses. It might be a major change like adding or deleting an experiment. Many reviews are discursive and meandering; a long review might have only a few action points. After you identify the action points, revise the manuscript quickly. In chapter 3, I argued that revisions should be high-priority project goals. They're close to publication, so don't slow down now. Some editors give deadlines for submitting a revision, such as 60 days or 90 days.

When you resubmit your manuscript, you'll need to send a cover letter that describes how you handled the criticisms and comments. Should you write a brief letter that highlights the major changes, or should you write a comprehensive list of all the changes? My informal survey of journal editors found unanimous support for lengthy, detailed resubmission letters. Most of the editors complained about authors who wrote skimpy letters ("We changed a lot; we hope you like it"), authors who resisted making any changes, and authors who discussed things they changed but didn't discuss why they ignored some of the reviewers' comments. By showing precisely what you did and didn't change, a detailed letter makes it easier for an editor to accept your revised manuscript.

Your resubmission letter must be detailed and constructive; you must address each action point openly and thoroughly. People who publish a lot write great resubmission letters. These letters sell your changes and show the editor that you're a serious scientist who takes feedback well. Brief, vague letters make authors look as if they have something to hide; long, detailed
letters make the authors look constructive and sincere. Be polite and professional—your letter is not the place to belittle a lazy reviewer, to defend your honor from a belligerent reviewer, or to flaunt your superior skills in statistics. It’s tempting, but take the scientific high ground instead.

I collected a stash of strong resubmission letters written by colleagues who have published a lot or who have edited journals. Here’s what you should do.

- Begin your resubmission letter by thanking the editor for his or her comments and for the opportunity to submit a revised draft. Even though you would have preferred flat-out acceptance, you still managed to beat the journal’s rejection rate.

- Create headings for each set of action points. Many writers organize their letters according to who gave the comments. A typical structure is to create a Your Comments heading followed by Reviewer 1’s Comments, Reviewer 2’s Comments, and so forth. Within each heading, exhaustively address each point made by that reviewer using numbered lists. Numbered lists simplify the letter and make it easy to refer to points made earlier. For example, perhaps both reviewers suggested adding more detail about your sample. Although you discussed this under Reviewer 1’s Comments, discuss it under Reviewer 2’s Comments, too. Simply dispatch it by noting the comment and referring to the number of your earlier discussion.

- Tackle each action point with a three-part system. First, summarize the comment or criticism. Second, describe what you did in response to this comment; cite specific page numbers in your manuscript whenever possible. Third, discuss how this resolves the comment.

- The editor doesn’t expect you to follow each suggestion, but he or she expects you to discuss why you didn’t follow it. I have seen resubmission letters in which the authors stubbornly refused to make trivial changes such as combining small tables into a bigger table or chopping 10% off the manuscript. Pick your battles. If you don’t follow a comment, give that comment extra detail in your cover letter. Justify why you didn’t make the change.

- Be professional; don’t be fawning and obsequious. The editor doesn’t think the reviewers are geniuses, and he or she doesn’t expect you to refer to the reviewers’ comments as masterful, great, brilliant, or insightful. Put yourself in the editor’s role. Would an ingratiating cover letter persuade you, or would you think, “This person is a dork”?

Good resubmission letters will make you look like a serious scholar—because you are. People who deal constructively with criticism deserve to be published. Sometimes it takes me longer to write a resubmission letter than to revise the manuscript. The resubmission letter for one of my manuscripts (Silvia & Gendolla,
2001) was 3,200 words, about the length of chapter 5 of this book. Some of my published articles have fewer than 3,200 words.

**"But What if They Reject My Paper?"**

Many writers fear receiving negative feedback, getting rejected, or being wrong. A classic theory of achievement motivation proposed two motives that affect performance: a need to achieve success and a need to avoid failure (Atkinson, 1964). Situational factors can amplify these motives, and writing journal articles seems to evoke a writer’s need to avoid failure. Many writers—particularly people new to the world of academic writing—ruminate about rejection. They worry about what the editor will say; they imagine a reviewer scowling while reading their manuscript; they dread the rejection letter in their in-box.

People’s need to avoid failure makes them ask questions like “But what if they reject my paper?” Of course they’ll reject your paper. You should write your paper on the assumption that the journal will reject it. Theories of decision making point out that base rates are the most rational estimates for decisions made under uncertainty. If a journal rejects 80% of submissions, then the base rate of acceptance is 20%. In the absence of any other information, the rational estimate is that your paper has a 20% chance of acceptance. Because no journals have rejection rates below 50%, I assume that each paper I submit will be rejected. It’s the only rational conclusion, and my faith in rationality is supported by the amount of rejections I receive.

“That’s bleak,” you might say. “How can you be motivated to write if you expect rejection?” First, people shouldn’t be motivated to write—they should simply stick to a writing schedule, mental rain or mental shine. Second, beginning writers seem to think that they’re the only people who get rejected. Researchers who publish a lot of articles receive a lot of rejections. Psychology’s most prolific writers get more rejections per year than other writers get in a decade. I find the base rates of rejection oddly comforting. I feel less uncertain about what will happen, I don’t feel so bad when my paper is rejected, and I prevent myself from indulging in fruitless fantasies of imagining my work in print before I finish the manuscript.

You’ll write better when you expect rejection, because you’ll mute the need to avoid failure. Writers motivated by failure avoidance write papers that sound defensive, wishy-washy, and uncertain. Instead of trying to look good, they try not to look bad. Readers can feel the fear. Writers motivated by the need to achieve success, in contrast, write papers that sound confident and controlled. These writers focus on the strengths of the work, assert the importance of the research, and convey a persuasive sense of confidence.

And as for whether reviewers will hate your paper: Yes, sometimes they will hate your paper. Here’s an excerpt from a blistering rejection that I received recently. In summarizing the reviews, the editor wrote,
Both reviewers believed your manuscript was below publication standards. One reviewer believes that the manuscript did not make a significant contribution, misinterpreted opposing theories, offered conclusions not well tied to research evidence, and was plagued by imprecise writing. The other reviewer believes that the manuscript falls short of advancing a complete and accurate model, makes unsupported claims, omits general important studies and ideas, and makes some faulty theoretical assumptions and criticisms.

And that was the editor’s cordial summary of the reviews—one of the reviewers was mean. But that’s okay. I extracted action points from the reviews, revised the manuscript, and submitted it to a different journal. Given base rates, it’ll probably get rejected again.

Sometimes, rejections are unfair, mean, and poorly reasoned. Sometimes you can tell that the editor or reviewers didn’t read your paper carefully. Resist the urge to complain to the editor. I have heard of people writing the editor an angry letter that denounced the reviewers as lazy incompetents. Those letters never work, probably because the editor is often friends with one or more of the reviewers. Some people recommend writing this embittered letter but not mailing it. That’s even more irrational—why waste your scheduled writing time with fruitless venting? Spend your time revising your paper instead. The world is unfair ($p < .001$), so take what you can from the reviews, revise your paper, and send it somewhere else.

To write a lot, you should rethink your mental models of rejection and publication. Rejections are like a sales tax on publications: The more papers you publish, the more rejections you receive. Following the tips in this book will make you the most rejected writer in your department.

“**But What if They Make Me Change Everything?”**

Journals are science’s public record. Your article will be printed on acid-free paper and archived on library shelves for eternity, however long that will be. Scientific progress is faster when people connect their work to others’ work, identify problems in their own research, analyze data properly, and avoid misleading descriptions of what they or others have accomplished. Journals are not a forum for psychologists to rant about their personal opinions—that’s what newsletters and conferences are for. Science holds published research to high standards and uses peer review to provide quality control. You will be asked to change your paper; sometimes those changes will be extensive. If this bothers you, then you’ll hate to hear that published articles are always better than the first drafts. Published research is more focused, less confrontational, and more circumspect. Peer review is irksome for authors, but it’s central to psychology’s scientific mission.

**Coauthoring Journal Articles**

It might take a village to conduct a research project, but the villagers should keep their mitts off the article.
I asked a lot of people how they wrote papers that had several authors, and nearly everyone said that one author did most of the writing. The authors collectively develop and approve an outline, but one person generates the text. When the paper is done, all of the authors read it, provide comments, or rewrite parts as needed. A variation of this involves assigning sections to different authors. A common division of labor assigns one person to write the method and results sections and another person to write everything else. I did find, however, some people who literally wrote together. One pair of writers pulled two chairs in front of a computer, talked about what to say, and passed the keyboard back and forth. Another person said that he and a colleague wrote grants by putting two computers in a room and writing together. This system allowed them to work out kinks in the proposal and to interrupt each other with questions. Maybe a few villagers should touch the article, after all.

Be careful whom you write with. Don’t commit to research collaborations without discussing who will write the manuscript. If your collaborator is a binge writer, be skeptical of assurances about writing the paper quickly or expressions of excitement about the research. Enthusiasm isn’t commitment. If you can’t trust your coauthor, write the first draft yourself as the first author. Sometimes, after you’ve done the hard work of writing, your coauthor takes forever to provide comments on the manuscript. Set deadlines for your coauthors when you give them the first draft. Say, “I want to submit this within 2 weeks, so get comments to me before then.” Submit the paper when the deadline passes. A friend of mine sent a derelict coauthor an e-mail with “You’re off the paper” as the subject. That worked.

Derelict coauthors are a big problem for graduate students, particularly when the coauthor is the faculty advisor. Many students complain that their advisors are holding up their articles—some advisors take months or years to comment on manuscripts that the student wrote. It’s hard for graduate students to push their advisors around, so sneakerier strategies are in order. Try to get someone else to push your advisor around. Why not complain to another faculty member, the department chair, or the director of graduate studies? If that doesn’t work, photocopy this section from this book and anonymously leave it in your advisor’s mailbox. The brah can attach it to a copy of their manuscript. Finally, set a deadline for your advisor and submit the paper yourself. The unwillingness to read a student’s paper and provide comments shows a lack of commitment to graduate training and the process of science. Say, “I really need to submit this within 4 weeks,” and remind the person 2 weeks and 3 weeks later.

**Writing Review Articles**

After writing a few empirical articles, it might be time to think about review articles. A lot of people read
review articles: researchers looking for new ideas, students learning a new area, teachers preparing lectures, and policymakers checking out what psychology has to say. Empirical articles are easy to write once you master the formula provided by APA style, but review articles are tricky. The motivational issues are the same—stick to your writing schedule—but the organizational issues are different. Researchers can write many kinds of reviews, with different goals, structures, and methods (Cooper, 2003), and there’s no formula.

Because review articles are so diverse, you’ll need to do a lot of planning. Your first decision concerns the scope of your article. Some review journals, such as *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, publish crisp, short reviews. Other journals, such as *Psychological Review, Psychological Bulletin,* and *Review of General Psychology,* publish long, comprehensive articles. How long will your article be? Your second decision concerns the audience for your article. In addition to its general review journals, psychology has many review journals devoted to special topics, such as *Clinical Psychology Review* and *Personality and Social Psychology Review.* Do you want to reach a broad swath of your field, or are you writing for an audience of specialists?

After you have a sense of your article’s scope and audience, you’ll need an outline that develops its central idea. Review articles must make an original point; they shouldn’t merely review what has been done. The worst review articles string together descriptions of other articles. Reading an endless litany of study—one article found this, and another experiment found this, and another study found this—is like watching laundry spinning in a dryer, except that something good eventually comes out of a dryer. To develop your original point, think about the distinction that creativity researchers make between problem solving and problem finding (Sawyer, 2006). A problem-solving review describes a problem (such as a controversial or ambiguous area of research) and proposes a solution to the problem (such as a new theory, model, or interpretation). A problem-finding review develops new concepts and identifies topics that deserve more attention. Good review articles involve both problem solving and problem finding. Resolving a conflict between two theories, for example, usually implies new directions for future research. What’s the problem that you want to solve? What new ideas come from your solution?

A review article’s most common flaw is the absence of an original point. Some authors rehash research without drawing a conclusion; other authors describe competing theories without offering a resolution. This flaw has two causes. First, writers can’t develop a new idea if they don’t have any new ideas. It happens. After reading a massive body of work, you might learn that you have nothing original to add. If so, don’t stubbornly write a review article to justify the time spent reading the articles. Second, some writers don’t outline. They sit down with a stack of articles, grimly describe each study, and then tack a short “critical
summary” to the end of the paper. A complex project requires a strong outline—without one, your original point will be eclipsed by the mass of past research. Instead of writing review articles, people who don’t outline should drive to the local animal shelter and adopt a dog, one that will love them despite their self-defeating and irrational habits.

If you have an original point, don’t hide it under a bushel—or under a laundry basket, if you don’t own any bushels. Your original point should appear within the first few paragraphs of your article. The first part of your review article should introduce the article’s central ideas, outline the article, and prefigure the original point that you plan to make. It’s tempting to write a chronological review—first Theory 1, then Theory 2, and then a critical analysis—but don’t do it. Reviews contain a lot of information, so your readers need a good outline at the start of the article. Unlike good mystery novels, good review articles reveal the culprit on the first page.

Review articles sound hard to write, and they are. That’s why binge writers rarely write review articles: There’s so much to read, so much to digest, and so much to write. But reflective, disciplined writers have nothing to fear. If you have a schedule, it doesn’t matter that review articles are hard work: You have clear goals, an inviolable schedule, and good habits, so it’s just a matter of time before you finish your review article. After you decide to write one, spend some of your scheduled writing time getting advice.

Baumeister and Leary (1997) wrote an excellent guide to writing narrative reviews; you’ll also find good advice in articles by Bem (1995), Cooper (2003), and Eisenberg (2000).

**Conclusions**

When struggling to write their first article, some writers lament, “Why would they care about my research?” If they refers to the world at large, I can assure you that they are uninterested in your research. But if they refers to researchers in your area, then you should expect some interest in your article. Remember that you’re writing a technical article for an audience of specialists that shares your interests. Your paper might be rejected once or twice before it finds a good home, but a good paper will always find a home. To write good articles, master the article formula, submit pristine first drafts, and craft excellent resubmission letters. You’ll find that the world of journals isn’t scary: It’s merely slow.