

Publish & Flourish: Become a Prolific Scholar

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The myth persists that prolific scholars are born, not made, but research suggests otherwise. Much is known about how to become more prolific—and any scholar can. These steps will show you how.

Step 1. Write daily for 15 to 30 minutes. Many scholars believe that writing requires big blocks of time. They're wrong. Research shows that scholars who write *daily* publish far more than those who write in big blocks of time. The problem with big blocks of time is that they're hard to find. In contrast, when you write daily, you start writing immediately because you remember what you were writing about the day before. This leads to impressive production. In one study participants who wrote daily wrote only twice as many hours as those who wrote occasionally in big blocks of time but wrote or revised ten times as many pages (Boice 2000:144).

Step 2. Record time spent writing daily, share records weekly. Writing daily increases your productivity as a writer. But to write daily you will need to keep a daily record of your writing, and share those records with someone weekly. What difference does keeping records make? Robert Boice led a series of workshops for scholars who sought to improve their writing productivity. Boice stressed the importance of writing daily, keeping a record of the minutes spent on writing, and being accountable to someone weekly. Participants were divided into three groups: (a) The first group (“controls”) did not change their writing habits, and continued to write occasionally in big blocks of time; in 1 year they wrote an average of *17 pages*; (b) the second group wrote daily and kept a daily record; they averaged *64 pages*; (c) the third group wrote daily, kept a daily record, and held themselves accountable to someone weekly; this group's average was *157 pages* (Boice 1989:609). Without records and someone to share them with it is too easy to convince yourself that you will write “tomorrow.” But “tomorrow” never comes—or at least it doesn't come very often.

Step 3. Write from the first day of your research project. Write from the first day of your project—as soon as you have a research idea—and keep writing throughout the project. Don't finish the research first; research as you write, and write as you research. Not all writing must be formal and polished. Some writing is done simply to generate thought and to keep a record of ideas, however crude, so they can be reviewed and revised later. The roughest draft can be valuable precisely because it can be saved, reviewed, and revised. Physicist Dallin Durfee (Brigham Young University) explains how writing this way improved his research and saved time:

I've begun to write about my physics experiments while they are still in progress, allowing me to see weaknesses in our experiments and realize what data will be most useful in making cohesive arguments early on, before research time has been wasted on unfruitful ideas

Step 4. Post your thesis on the wall, then write to it. When you sit down to write, take a stab at describing what you are going to write about. Don't make this difficult by trying to write the perfect sentence. Just jot down a word or a phrase; you can develop it later. Treat this as a *working* thesis: You can and should change it later. Better theses will almost invariably arise from this writing process. Eventually, you will want a short, memorable sentence that tells your reader what is at stake, what problem you are trying to solve, what claim you are making, or what your result or conclusion is. Just assert your point; don't burden the thesis with trying to prove it—you have the rest of the paper to do that. Post your thesis on the wall. Then define, refine, and write to your purpose. Keep coming back to your thesis. Work back and forth between your thesis and the rest of your paper, revising first one and then the other.

Step 5. Organize around key sentences. Readers expect nonfiction to have one point per paragraph. The point of the paragraph should be contained in a key or topic sentence, located early in the paragraph and supported by the rest of the paragraph. A key sentence is to a paragraph like a street sign is to a street: it helps the reader to navigate by showing what is to come. A key sentence announces the topic of the paragraph (Williams 1990:97-105). It must be broad enough to "cover" everything in the paragraph but not so broad that it raises issues that are not addressed in the paragraph. To test this idea, ask yourself the (key) question: "Is the rest of the paragraph about the idea in the key sentence?" The key sentence should announce the topic without trying to prove the point—the rest of the paragraph serves that function. It should include the key words; that is, if the paragraph is about Napoleon, then "Napoleon" (rather than "he") should be the subject of the key sentence.

A key sentence differs from what many people were taught about topic sentences because a key sentence need not be the first sentence in a paragraph (Williams 1990:90, 101). The later the key sentence appears in a paragraph, the longer the paragraph tends to be. When writers take longer to warm up to the key sentence, they also take longer to explain, support, and qualify it (Williams 1990:92-93). How long writers take to warm up is mostly a matter of tradition, and various disciplines have various traditions. In most scientific disciplines, key sentences tend to be the first sentence in the paragraph; in other disciplines, key sentences appear as the second or third sentence in the paragraph.

Step 6. Use key sentences as an after-the-fact outline. To examine the organization of your writing, list the key sentences—and headings—to see an after-the-fact outline (Booth, Colomb and Williams 2003:213, 188). Now, read the list and question yourself about the purpose and organization of the writing:

- How could the key sentences better communicate the purpose (thesis) of the paper to the intended audience?

- How could the key sentences be better organized? More logical? More coherent?

Once you have viewed your key sentences as an after-the-fact outline a few times you will discover how valuable it is to see your prose through this new lens. You will also discover there is no point in waiting to view your paper this way until you have a full draft of a writing project. Instead, you will find it useful to begin each writing session by viewing only the headings and key sentences of the section you worked on the previous day.

Step 7. Share early drafts with non-experts. The biggest communication problem is overestimating what your readers know. After all, you have thought about your research problem for months or years, but your readers probably haven't. To find out what your readers know and don't know, flick the imaginary reader off your shoulder and find some real readers—actual humans you can talk to. Caution: The more expert your readers are on the topic, the less likely they will be to tell you what they don't know and need to know. So find readers who don't know very much about the topic: colleagues in different disciplines, family members, undergraduate students. These are the people who will point out problems of organization and clarity without fearing that they will appear to be uninformed. Prod these non-experts to think about clarity and organization: “What passages were hardest to understand?” “Where did you feel unsure about where you were going?” Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no,” such as “Is the paper clear?” Such questions do not invite dialog. Instead, ask questions that start a dialog with your non-expert readers.

Step 8. Share later drafts with little-e experts and Capital-E Experts. Little-e experts include anyone trained in your discipline; Capital-E Experts include the biggest experts in your discipline or your sub-discipline. Share middle drafts with experts who can help you in some of the ways that non-experts can help you—as well as some of the ways that Capital-E Experts can help you. Little-e experts can help you with clarity and organization as non-experts can, but only if you make it very safe for them to ask questions about those topics. Because you have written this paper, you will know far more about the topic than they do. So you must make it safe for them to ask you questions. Some experts can also help you by giving you ideas for what you should read and where to send your article and they can help you get better known in your field by referring your work to others and so on. That is to say, some little-e experts can help you in many of the same ways that Capital-E Experts can help you. For that reason, you should approach them in much the same way you approach Capital-E Experts, as discussed next, except that you can share earlier drafts with them because you know them better and know more of them. Strive to get about half your feedback from experts.

Share near-finished drafts with at least two Capital-E Experts. Why do you want to send near-finished drafts to Experts, when you could wait for them to read the final copy in print? Because they are far more likely to read—and engage with and cite—something that lands on their desk with a letter addressed specifically to them than with something

that they find “in the literature.” So approach the Experts by tailoring an e-mail or letter that explains how their work has informed yours and by asking specific questions aimed at the intersection of your work and theirs. Explain that you are asking only for a “quick read” and would be delighted if they would spend even 20 minutes with your work. Then ask, “What articles should I read and cite that I haven’t?” and “To what journal would you send this manuscript?” Don’t be bashful; ask for a turnaround of 2 to 3 weeks.

Step 9. Learn how to listen. Remember, when it comes to clarity, the reader is always right. “Clarity is a social matter, not something to be decided unilaterally by the writer. The reader like the consumer, is sovereign. If the reader thinks something you write is unclear, then it is, by definition. Quit arguing” (McCloskey 2000:12).

Step 10. Respond to each criticism. The paper is usually read by several reviewers. Don’t expect reviewers—or other readers—to make identical comments. It’s tempting to conclude that, when reviewers don’t make the same suggestions, they disagree. When researchers examined scholarly reviews, they found that reviewers gave good [specific] advice and did not contradict each other (Fiske and Fogg 1990:591-597). Generally, one reader will criticize the literature review, another will find fault with the methods, and yet another will take umbrage with the findings. If you make changes in response to each of these reviewers, you will improve the paper and reduce the chance that other readers will find fault with the manuscript. Think of each specific concern as a hole in your rhetorical “dam:” the more holes you plug, the better your argument will “hold water.”

Step 11. Read your prose out loud. To polish your prose, read it out loud to someone, or have someone read it out loud to you. You can hear when the prose is awkward and least conversational. And, you can listen for excessive precision. If you just can’t bring yourself to ask someone for help with your whole paper, ask someone for help with the abstract, introduction, and conclusion. If you can’t find someone to help you, read it out loud to yourself.

Step 12. Kick it out the door and make ‘em say “No.” You are almost ready to send your paper out, but two obstacles remain: perfectionism and fear of rejection. Expect rejection and plan for it. Select three journals for every manuscript. Address three envelopes—and stamp them. By choosing three journals, you have a long-term plan for your paper. If your paper is rejected at the first journal, you are prepared to send it to the second journal without the usual delay. And, keep your perfectionism in check. You may say that your paper is not really done. It could be better. That’s true today, and it will be true 10 years from now. It’s tough to know when “enough is enough.” As a writer, you must find the balance between “making it better and getting it done” (Becker 1986: 122). You’ve written it. Trusted colleagues have read it. You’ve responded to their criticisms—it’s time to kick it out the door (Becker 1986: 121). Artists are encouraged not to over-paint a picture, and bury a good idea in a muddy mess. And so it is for writers: don’t overwrite your paper and bury a good idea in a muddy mess (Becker 1986: 131). Don’t worry—if your writing needs more work, you’ll get another chance. Anonymous reviewers are not known for being over kind. Your job is to write it and

mail it. Their job is to tell you if it will embarrass you publicly. You've done your job so make 'em do theirs: Kick it out the door and make 'em say "YES!"

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* The excerpts above come from the book by Tara Gray, Publish & Flourish: ***Become a Prolific Scholar***, which is available for \$15 from <http://www.teaching.nmsu.edu/acadbookstore.html>. Tara has given workshops at universities in more than twenty states, including Harvard University, and three countries. You can read about these workshops at www.taragray.com.