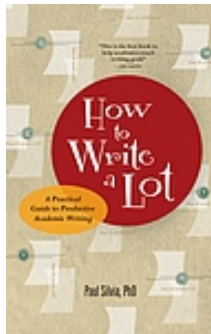


## Writer's Block Is a Myth: Make a Schedule and Stick to It!

A review of



### **How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing**

by Paul J. Silvia

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007. 149 pp. ISBN 978-1-59147-743-3. \$14.95, paperback



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Reviewed by

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Every academic who lacks a formal writing schedule could benefit from the main message of this book: The key to writing productivity is to set an explicit writing schedule and adhere to it. This suggestion is at the heart of Paul Silvia's *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing*, and the message is repeated frequently throughout the book. Hearing (or reading) the message, however, is not sufficient to make a would-be writer comply with Silvia's advice. To bolster his proposition, Silvia offers empirical and anecdotal support, including concrete tips and guidance about how to set a specific

schedule, how to develop tangible writing goals, and how to determine the activities that should take place during scheduled writing time.

Silvia's advice about scheduled writing time is not new. Taylor and Martin's (1987) chapter in *The Compleat Academic* and Bolker's (1998) book *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day* come to mind as excellent examples of others who have put forth the same message. One unique aspect of Silvia's scheduling system is his definition of what counts as writing. His definition includes "any action that is instrumental in completing a writing project" (p. 19), such as outlining, reading related articles, and data analysis. He asserts that by devoting an individually defined amount of time to these activities, writers will see substantial increases in productivity. Although Silvia is relatively new to the field (he received his doctorate in 2001), even a cursory glance at the long list of publications on his website (<http://silvia.socialpsychology.org>)—which includes authorship of two books (one as second author) published before this one—confirms that this simple system has served him well.

Although the intended audience is academic psychologists, the book is worthwhile reading for anyone who wants to become a more productive writer. Anyone who has ever said "I wish I could find the time to write more" should refer to the section titled Specious Barrier 1, in which Silvia debunks the myth that it is possible to "find more time." He states that he imagines such people "roaming through their schedules like naturalists in search of Time To Write, that most elusive and secretive of creatures" (p. 12). His solution, of course, is to set aside a block of time and to use the time for uninterrupted writing. Silvia does not try to glorify writing; in fact, he describes writing as "frustrating, complicated, and un-fun" (p. 4). Yet, for those of us who do research, writing is a necessary evil for communicating our findings and sometimes for keeping our jobs.

Silvia asserts that writer's block is another common myth among academic writers. He states, "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" (p. 45). Silvia believes that although novelists and poets *may* suffer from writer's block, among academic writers, writer's block simply refers to failure to engage in the activity of writing. Although it is probably not necessary for me to reiterate his cure for this fictional malady (because you have probably already guessed at the panacea), I'll state it anyway—simply write.

In addition to suggestions for how to write more, Silvia offers suggestions for how to write better. Although many of these suggestions are useful, others seem more like personal grievances. I agree with many of his beliefs, such as simpler words are usually preferable to complex words, trendy words are best avoided, and tedious abbreviations should seldom be used in place of complete words. However, a few of his ideas suggest that academic writers should challenge the conventions of the field (which could have the unintended consequence of annoying journal reviewers and editors). For example, Silvia suggests using the word *people* in place of *participants*. There are times when this suggestion could result in ambiguity by suggesting that the research finding being discussed generalizes to all people; use of the term *participants* makes it clear that the people being referenced are those participating in the study. Similarly, in the chapter on writing for academic journals, Silvia states, "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" (p. 88). Examples of limitations that he describes as inherent to all research and therefore not necessary to mention include statements concerning the size and representativeness of the study sample. However, I suspect that most academic writers have received negative comments from reviewers when such limitations have not been explicitly stated in a manuscript.

Regardless of how well they write, academic writers are faced with inevitable rejection.

Silvia offers a number of encouragements for coping with the predictable cycle of criticism

and rejection when submitting written materials to academic journals. He states, "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" (pp. 100–101). He explains that on the basis of the high rejection rate of most academic journals, the most likely outcome of any submission is that it will be rejected. Writers who submit papers to academic journals should, therefore, follow the submission guidelines of the publication; submit their manuscript in a well-written, polished form; and expect inevitable failure. When using this approach, writers will welcome every offer to revise and resubmit as an unexpected and rewarding surprise. Silvia's writing style is lively and often witty. Reading his book is quick and effortless. Like the book, I'll keep my evaluation short and to the point: Purchase the book and read it during your (newly) scheduled writing time. Reading a book about writing, after all, fits under the rubric of an activity instrumental to one's writing projects. *How to Write a Lot* can easily be read in an afternoon, and it will be time well spent.

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## References

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- Taylor, S. E., & Martin, J. (1987). The present-minded professor: Controlling one's career. In M. P. Zanna & J. M. Darley (Eds.), *The compleat academic* (pp. 23–60). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

PsycCRITIQUES

July 4, 2007, Vol. 52, Release 27, Article 4

1554-0138

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