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Publish, Don’t Perish: Twelve Steps to Help Scholars Flourish

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Some faculty flourish as scholars, and these faculty differ from other faculty in important ways. This article offers twelve steps that faculty can take to flourish. These steps require not only faith in oneself, but also faith that trying new writing and time management strategies as well as getting help from colleagues will improve and transform our research.

Some faculty publish far more than others, and these faculty differ in important ways from other faculty. According to writing expert Robert Boice, these faculty set limits on lecture preparation time, limiting it to about half what other faculty spend. They are proactive in soliciting advice about both teaching and research from their colleagues. They are willing to share their writing in its formative stages. They write during more weeks of the semester, including the busiest weeks. They rarely write in binges (except for grant writing). And, they complain little about busyness; they seem more positive and less stressed about their jobs (Boice 1992:23).

Research shows that faculty can begin to be more productive like these writers and to publish more by taking certain steps. The foundation of these steps is faith: faith in ourselves as writers as well as faith in our ability to try new writing and time management strategies, and to transform our writing based on help from others. To this end, this paper discusses twelve steps for writers:

1. Believe you have something to say.
2. Don’t finish the literature review first: read as you write, and write as you read.
3. Organize your paper around paragraphs, that are themselves summarized by one key sentence.
4. Work on one project at a time--until you gain some momentum.
5. Become a manager of your time, not a victim of it.
6. Differentiate between the “urgent” and the important.
7. Set aside daily blocks of time to write, even half an hour.
8. Hold yourself accountable to a supportive partner.
9. Share early drafts with trusted colleagues.
10. Learn to accept and benefit from criticism.
11. Develop thick skin—really thick.
12. Kick It Out the Door and Make ‘Em Say “No.”

**Writing Strategies**

1. **Believe you have something to say.**
   To be successful writers, we have to know when to play the “believing” game as opposed to the “doubting” game (Moxley 1997: 5-6): that is, we have to know when to revise our writing, but also when to refrain from revision. Of course, revision can be painful; you begin to find your stuff distasteful. This creates doubt. Waves of doubt—the conviction that everything you’ve done so far is rubbish... The only help is a cheerful faith that more work will raise even this rubbish up to your newly acquired standards. (McCloskey 1985:196)

   Indeed, revision requires a great deal of faith, a strong sense of self or “cheer and an irrational optimism” (McCloskey 1985:196). As writers we have to revise, which requires us to be self-critical; to write the first draft, however, we have to turn our internal critics off, or at least turn them down (Moxley 1992:29).

   It is hard to turn our internal critics off because the perception persists that “too many” people are already writing and those who are not “have nothing to say.” Indeed, we have been taught to be elitists, which is what keeps most writers from writing (Boice 1992:16). Sadly, this elitism is internalized by many “silent writers” themselves, who claim that “much of what gets published falls below their own standards” (Boice 1992:16). This is elitism at its worst—setting unrealistic standards that few can meet, including ourselves. Everyone who reads widely, “thinks” and teaches for a living has something to say. “Be selfish for a while about the little candle of creation you are tending, however poor it may seem beside the conflagrations of the giants” (McCloskey 1985:199-200). You have something to say; just write it down.

2. **Don’t finish the literature review first: read as you write, and write as you read.** Everybody knows that the literature review should be finished first. Many writers think they should read everything ever written before beginning to write (Moxley 1992:25), but it is not true:

   Don’t wait until the research is done to begin writing because writing is a way of thinking. Be writing all the time, working on a page or two here, a section there. (McCloskey 1985:196).

   Writing is not only a way of thinking; it is a *superior* way because it can be revisited and revised. So don’t try to finish the literature review first: read as you write, and write as you read.¹

3. **Organize your paper around paragraphs that are themselves summarized by one key sentence.** Everybody knows that organization is the curse of beginning writers, but scholars often forget that it is also our curse. When writing a first draft, try to organize each paragraph around one key sentence that summarizes the meaning of the paragraph—the one you would want saved if your computer were eating the paragraph a sentence at a time (Williams and Colomb 1990: 97-103). When revising the draft, find the key sentence in each paragraph and underline it.

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¹ Incidentally, a literature review is never finished, and trying to finish it first will just slow you down. In fact, you may do better not to try to “finish” it at all, ever. I once tried to finish a literature review. I collected an entire file drawer full of articles, alphabetized by author. When I took my current job, I learned that my new department head, L. Thomas Winfree, had published a similar article that I had never read. In the number one journal in my field. My literature review was not really finished, and it never will be.
If you can’t find a key sentence, the reader won’t be able to find it either, and will judge your work as poorly organized. Once each paragraph has a key sentence, write them down in order. Now ask yourself, if I assembled all of these sentences into a list, would it make sense? (Booth, Colomb and Williams 1995:205-206). This list doesn’t have to be elegant because it wasn’t written to be read this way. However, if it doesn’t make sense at all, work with it until it does. Then you will have written a paper that is organized around paragraphs, with each paragraph summarized by one key sentence.

4. Work on one project at a time—until you gain some momentum. The prolific writers encourage us to work on more than one project at a time, so that we will get enough perspective to see the problems with our work (Moxley 1997:13-14; Becker 1986: 104). The prolific writers write this way so it is good advice: for them. However, there is nothing more frustrating than watching colleagues write one conference paper after another, but publish nothing. In my experience, learning to write is a little like learning to bowl. You wind up carefully and watch breathlessly as the ball rolls to the pins. For the gutter balls, you groan; for the spares and strikes, you cheer wildly. You bowl carefully for a while, rolling one ball at a time. After a while, you grow tired of bowling. You decide to try juggling, with each writing project serving as a ball in the air. Juggling is better and faster, but new scholars who try juggling may find that all their ideas fall to the floor. Work on one project at a time—for a while (Valian 1985).

Time Management Strategies

5. Become a manager of your time, not a victim of it. Faculty perceive ourselves to be extremely busy. As a result, Boice (1987; 1989) surveyed faculty about their time spent working in at least five different institutions ranging from a four-year college to a doctoral-granting university. When 108 new faculty at a regional university were asked to estimate retroactively how much time per week they work, the average estimate was 58 hours per week, with half the time spent on research. However, when the same faculty were asked to keep records of their workweeks, they reported that they worked 31 hours per week, with 1.5 hours spent on research, including only half an hour spent writing (Boice 1989:606). Afterwards, most of the faculty were “forthright with admissions that they were not nearly as busy as they had supposed” (Boice 1992:17). They discovered that they rarely had days without some free period, which they usually used for a low-priority activity such as reading their mail or the newspaper or talking on the phone. You are not as busy as you think you are. (And neither am I.)

Many faculty, especially new ones, feel immersed in sixty-hour workweeks and the most stressful years of their lives. In fact, in the study mentioned above, 55 percent of the faculty surveyed answered “yes” to the question, “Is this the busiest year of your life?” (Boice 1989:606). These faculty do not feel in control of themselves or their careers (Boice 1992:18). Indeed, some of them may not be working nearly as hard as they think they are, but others may be well on their way to living up to the title of the excellent book, Working Ourselves to Death (Fassell 1990). They are all victims of their time, not managers of it. Sometimes these scholars compete for the “biggest victim” award (and sometimes I engage in the competition). Instead of seeing being “busy” as a status symbol, I am trying to see it as a way of staying victimized. Become a manager of your time, not a victim of it.
6. Differentiate between the “urgent” and the important. One way to become a manager of your time is to differentiate between the “urgent” and the important (Covey 1994:33). It has been said that life is composed of the urgent, the important and the trivial. We exhaust ourselves on the urgent, seek rest in the trivial and forget the important (author unknown). Important things move you closer to your goals; urgent things seem to need to be done right now, usually for someone else. Examples of the “urgent” include answering phone calls, visiting with someone who drops by, and responding to someone else’s deadline. Even though it is often the urgent that makes us feel useful and successful, focus on the important (Covey 1994:33).

For college faculty, teaching tends to take priority over research because research is both urgent and important: there are so many people and deadlines involved. In contrast, research is not as urgent: there are fewer people and deadlines involved. It is easy for procrastinators (which includes most people) to get caught up in the “busyness” of teaching every day, which leaves teachers feeling intense, impatient and overscheduled. These teachers leave research to occasional “bings” in which research is performed in marathon fashion to the exclusion of nearly everything else (Boice 1992:19):

There is no room, apparently, for another high priority task. High priority tasks, especially for procrastinators, require large blocks of time and undisturbed working conditions (i.e. binging) (Boice 1989:611).

Convince yourself that your research may not be urgent, but it is important.

7. Set aside daily blocks of time to write, even half an hour. Short blocks of time can greatly improve productivity. In one study, faculty who set aside daily half an hour blocks to write wrote or revised almost 64 pages of prose in a year, which was almost four times the productivity of the control group (17 pages) (Boice 1989:609). But, you say, “How can I accomplish anything in half an hour?” The way to get a quick start tomorrow is by writing today, by keeping the flame of your research alive all the time, by never “dropping the ball,” but just setting it aside for one short day at a time. At the end of your writing time today, help yourself get started tomorrow by writing yourself a note about what you are going to do tomorrow so that you can think about it over night. Writing these notes to yourself may save you a half an hour of start-up time (McCloskey 1985:200). Of course, many faculty argue that they can only write effectively in large blocks of time; however, large blocks of time are hard to find (Boice 1989:608). When you wait for large blocks of time, first you’ll wait for summer, then sabbatical, then retirement (Boice 1992:18). Don’t wait: Set aside a (short) block of time today.

Seek Help from Others

8. Hold yourself accountable to a supportive partner. Just as the last several steps have encouraged us to substitute better time management for less time spent writing, the next few steps encourage us to substitute other people’s time for our own (Boice 1996:89). Writing regularly is easier when you hold yourself accountable to a supportive partner. In the study discussed previously in which some faculty agreed to write an average of half an hour a day, another group agreed to accept biweekly visits from the experimenter during the blocks of time that they had agreed to write. This group wrote or revised 157 pages per year, which was more than twice as much as those who did not accept the visits (sixty-four pages) and more than nine times as much as the control group did.

There are many ways to find an accountability partner: contact small groups of writers, look in the classifieds of the college newspaper, list your goals on the college bulletin board, or contact your campus writers’ program.

Collective effort has led to my own development of a personal writing group (Boice 1996:89). Indeed, writing requires a critical mass that encourages and supports writing. I have written with many colleagues and proposals, and more recently have been a member of a computer writing group influencing all stages of the writing process. Collectively, we get things done.

How do you make collective effort easier? I have found that if I set up accountability groups in the beginning, my work gets done more smoothly. Because the overall organization of my work is better, I am a more productive person.

In the drafting phase of this document, I drafted an early version of the section and sent it to all the people who had been identified as valuable (Boice 1996:89). We then met with these people and went through the document. We revised the sections of the paper as a group, and the overall project has gained a new direction and focus.
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trols (seventeen pages) (Boice 1989:609). Therefore, you may want to hold yourself accountable to a supportive partner, and meet with that partner each week. At my home campus and elsewhere, I have directed a program that facilitates such partnerships.

9. Share early drafts with trusted colleagues. As writers, we are not effective as our own audiences. When we read our own stuff, we are not really reading, but reviewing what we were thinking at the time (Booth, Colomb and Williams 1995:202). Indeed, writing improves when we debunk the lone scholar myth in favor of the view that critical readers can improve our writing. Next, we must find these critics. When I was a new scholar, I thought the only appropriate critics were the experts I cited most heavily. I would work on an article for months and then send it to these experts with a cover letter explaining how their work had influenced mine. About half of these experts, all strangers to me, would respond to my letters, which made this an excellent way to get feedback on a near-finished product. However, relying on “the experts” had two important weaknesses—I didn’t want to share early drafts with these folks and they understood what they read based on their own knowledge, rather than on the clarity of my writing. As a result, writers should also seek readers who are not experts in the area because they are more critical of the organization and other aspects of the writing (from a workshop with Joe Williams).

Choose readers who you know and trust so that you can ask them to read early drafts because early drafts are more likely to elicit comments and to benefit from them (Boice 1992:29). Choose readers who can “treat early drafts as early” and not criticize them with the standards appropriate to finished products (Becker 1986: 16, 18). Finally, choose readers who are willing to read and respond to drafts quickly. When you send papers out to others, put a time limit on it such as two weeks. In person, encourage readers by asking only for a “quick read.” “Just run your eyes over it,” I tell them, “and tell me the biggest problems you see.” Another tactic I use, is “I’ll show you mine [current working draft], if you show me yours.” I say we will be done in an hour, and we usually are. Keep experimenting until you find trusted colleagues to read early drafts; the alternative is to send a draft directly to a journal—and wait four months for a reply.

10. Learn to accept and benefit from criticism. It is not easy to accept criticism of our work as writers, even if we know that in one sense, at least, the reader is always right:

Clarity is a social matter, not something to be decided unilaterally by the writer, because the reader...is sovereign. If she thinks something you write is unclear, then it is, by definition. There’s no arguing (McCloskey 1985:191).

Indeed, the best writers must learn to accept the wisdom of their readers:

Listen to what your reader says as though it were all true. The way an owl eats a mouse. He takes it all in. He doesn’t try to sort out the good parts from the bad. He trusts his organism to make use of what’s good and get rid of what isn’t (Elbow 1973:102-103).

It is difficult to accept criticism of one’s work, but instead of reacting when someone criticizes it, ask for more information so you will be able to press the idea into service (Boice 1994:192-193). Ask leading questions such as, “Did I understand you to say...” or “How might I make a change that would help address that problem?” In this way, you will learn to swallow criticism whole, “the way an owl eats a mouse.”
11. Develop thick skin—really thick.

Every scholar knows intuitively what research shows about sending your materials out for review, especially anonymous review: it takes thick skin. Indeed, reviewers focus on the negative making up to 37 criticisms per paper with eight the average, and “make only broad statements-if any—about the positive features of papers” (Fiske and Fogg 1990:592). Reviewers also offer very different criticisms of papers, which means they tend to disagree on whether to publish the paper or not:

In the typical case, two reviews of the same paper had no critical point in common. ...As a consequence, their recommendations about editorial decisions showed hardly any agreement (Fiske and Fogg 1990:591).

Because reviewers routinely disagree on whether or not to publish a paper, we can only conclude that the reviewers are often wrong about their overall assessment.

It is easy then to conclude that the specific criticisms of reviewers are equally useless. However, researchers who examined the quality of scholarly reviews “were impressed by the amount of time and effort that reviewers put into their work” (Fiske and Fogg 1990:592). Even more importantly, however, the reviewers gave good advice:

Reviewers did not overtly disagree on particular points. Instead, they wrote about different topics; each making points that were appropriate and accurate....In instances in which we consulted the original manuscript, we found no reviewer criticism with which we disagreed....It was very uncommon for an editor to indicate disagreement with a point made by a reviewer. (Fiske and Fogg 1990:591; 597).

The readers may always be right in the sense that if the writer makes a specific change based on a reader's suggestion, it will almost always be a improvement.

I learned this lesson the hard way. On one of the first articles I ever wrote, I spent 100 hours per page and made the changes suggested by five well-known scholars. This had been my only project for a couple of years, and I finally thought it was ready to go. The sole reviewer wrote back, and the criticism began with the acknowledgments in which I thanked the scholars for their “comments”:

Didn’t any of them [these scholars] criticize the paper? Hard to believe! Did you ignore the criticisms?

There was more to follow, all of it written in red ink half an inch high:

This is a very badly prepared piece of work....This is a very poorly done paper....There are myriad other problems that plague this paper....This paper is so badly written that few persons will have the patience to try to make sense of it

I knew just what to do with this kind of review. I cried. Then I remembered that five readers liked it, and one did not. I decided to address the reviewer’s concerns quickly, spending only four hours, which was a small part of the time spent on the paper, less than one-half of one percent. I fired the paper off to an equally good journal, where it was accepted without revision. Looking back, it would have been easy to assume that the specific suggestions were as useless as the overall assessment of the piece. Despite the offensive tone of the overall assessment, the specific criticisms were excellent: my paper had serious organizational problems, and this reader knew it.

As a result, scholars do well to “solicit as much criticism as possible. In a peculiar way, criticism loses its venom when taken in large dosages” (Moxley 1997:16). Know that one reader will criticize the literature review, while another will find fault with the organization, and yet another will challenge
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12. Kick It Out the Door and Make ‘Em Say “No.” Before you can mail your paper, you have to decide what journal to send it to. Before deciding, learn how the journals are ranked in your discipline. This information is usually available in an issue of the “education” journal in your field; for example, The Journal of Economic Education or Journal of Criminal Justice Education. Selecting journals with this information in mind helps you when you go up for tenure or promotion because you can then show that the journals you chose were respectable. Next, contact a few editors of journals you are considering, tell them about your paper, and ask them how well it “fits” the mission of the journal. Based on the interest the editors express, choose a journal to send it to, and preferably, choose a backup journal.

But you say, “My paper is not really done. It could be better.” That’s true today and it will be true ten years from now. It’s tough to know when “enough is enough.” To find the balance between “making it better and getting it done” (Becker 1986: 122). Tell yourself that 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). As my colleague Larry Mays puts it: “Don’t make it a Lifetime Project.” Artists are encouraged not to over-paint a picture, and bury a good idea in a muddy mess (Becker 1986: 131). And so it is for writers: don’t bury a good idea in a muddy mess.

Don’t worry; if your writing needs more work, you’ll get another chance. Many articles are rejected, and only fifteen percent are accepted without revision (Mullins 1977 as cited in Fox 1985:29). Anonymous reviewers are not known for being over-kind. Even when the comments sting, however, it is important to revise and resubmit the paper because 85 percent of these papers are accepted (Henson 1997: 784). Nonetheless, many writers acknowledge that they do not resubmit after receiving a revise and resubmit from a journal and one journal editor reported that the number of re-submissions hovers around zero (Henson 1997: 784). The failure to revise-and-resubmit is one of the worst mistakes a scholar can make, which means that some writers need to develop thicker skin. Remember that your job is to write it and mail it. (And rewrite it and re-mail it.) The reviewer’s job is to tell you if it will embarrass you publicly. You have done your job, so make ‘em do theirs:

Kick it Out the Door
–And–
Make ‘Em Say “No.”

Working the Steps

Like anyone in recovery, writers have to work the steps—not once or twice, but over and over again for a lifetime. Believe you have something to say. Don’t finish the literature review first; read as you write and write as you read. Organize your paper around paragraphs that are themselves summarized by a key sentence. Work on one project at a time—until you gain some momentum. Become a manager of your time, not a victim of it. Differentiate between the “urgent” and the important. Set aside time
