

Getting unstuck with your research and writing: A personal reflection



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Writing is one of the very core activities of scholarly research that is common to absolutely every single researcher. It doesn't matter if you run experiments, if you calculate heat maps, if you deploy qualitative data from your interviews, or if you examine quantitative data from housing, regional growth, planning or environmental performance, you always must write the results of your studies. Writing is central to our activity as researchers. And yet, to this day, it would appear as though we all face the same challenge: some days, weeks or even months, we are simply unable to write. *It's not that we don't want to, it's that **we CAN'T***. Our brains are full of ideas, but somehow, they don't get through from our neurons to the tips of our fingers, to our word processors, all the way up to

generating publications.

Contrary to what many people think, and despite being a relatively seasoned scholar, I too get stuck. Being unable to write is every bit as frustrating to me as it is to anybody else I know, whether one of my undergraduate students or a colleague of mine who is a full professor at a prestigious university. In theory, we should be able to just sit down and crank words out of our word processor. This is an incredibly ancient myth, and one that apparently does not die. This very piece is one of the most challenging pieces I've ever written, and it's not for lack of experience producing text and giving advice on how to do academic writing. My entire research blog is devoted to the craft of research.

It's a narration of how I do things as a professor, and which techniques help me move my work forward. But this piece became extraordinarily hard to write because I felt that I wasn't immersed enough in the field of regional studies to produce something that would have validity for this specific audience. This impostor syndrome is not uncommon for scholars at all levels. I have heard full professors say "I don't belong here" or "my work isn't good enough" just as much as undergraduate and graduate students. Trust me when I say this, everyone I know in academia is afraid of rejection. Dr. Staci Zavattaro recently wrote for *Regions* precisely on this very topic.

As the deadline was looming in the horizon, I remembered that there is something that unites scholars of regional studies, urban planning, public administration, human geography: we all need to write and we all sometimes get stuck. And that's how I came up with the topic of this article. Now, you may ask yourself: **so what do I do when I'm stuck, or more aptly, what do I think you could do if you are feeling stuck with your writing and/or your research?** These pieces of advice are basically personal reflections that put into words what I've done all my life to get myself out of a rut. Be it an athletic challenge (I used to play competitive volleyball), or an artistic one (I used to dance professionally), or an academic problem (I'm a professor, and a researcher, after all!), I always come back to the same core ideas.

- **If you can't write, read.** This is something that I've done most of my life, but lately has become a strategy that has given me much more "mileage": there's a broad range of journal articles, books and book chapters, on top of grey literature, that I should have read by the time I am writing a

paper. While I champion a strategy of reading at least one piece every single day, you may not be able to do this. But you should at least devote time to reading if you are not writing. What you may find is that the pieces that you are reading can trigger an impulse to write, even if it's only notes on the margin.

- **If you can't write, go for a walk (or some simple distraction).** This strategy has improved my physical health, particularly because I often feel stuck. Sometimes, if my brain won't even start even if I read an article, I simply go for a walk. It's also a very nice way of creating or reaffirming bonds (I often go for walks with my Mom or my brothers, or my good friends). What I also do when I go for a walk is that I bring with me a small notebook and a pen in case I get a "Eureka!" moment and I finally figure out what's bothering me or why I am not finishing the paper/paragraph/section/analysis I am working on.
- **If you can't write, have a conversation.** My students often tell me that when they read books on how to do academic writing, they interpret advice saying that "writing is a social activity" as "you should send your writing for people to read all the time". This isn't always the case and not everyone has time in their schedules to provide meaningful feedback (although it's something that should be sought out, so find trusted friends who might be able to help in this realm). But you don't necessarily need to have someone you're your drafts to make research and writing social. Frequently, when I feel stuck with an idea, and I can't put it into writing, I call a good friend (or my Mom, who also happens to have a PhD and is a professor herself) and converse about the research issue I am having. Parsing my argument for other people to understand helps me enormously when I am feeling particularly stuck.
- **If you can't write, do other odds and ends related to your research (the "grunt work"):** Like anybody else I know in academia, I hate cleaning databases, formatting citations and capturing data. But the

reality is that our work, particularly if it is empirically-based, for sure needs additional work beyond the thinking, analysing and writing. Therefore, when I am feeling completely stuck, I end up doing what I call “the grunt work”: ensuring that all the references in my Mendeley database have the proper data filling each entry’s fields.

One additional piece of advice, if I may: make sure that you have a system and/or a routine. What I have found gets me out of a writing rut quite quickly is doing the things that I normally would do every single day. For example, my normal daily routine includes:

- Waking up
- Preparing a pot of coffee
- Brushing my teeth, washing my face
- Starting my laptop
- Looking at my Everything Notebook and checking my To-Do Lists
- Reading and annotating one article or book chapter using my AIC Content Extraction system
- Dropping my notes into a Conceptual Synthesis Excel Dump entry.
- Start writing if I have a specific paragraph/section.
- Go to the gym and exercise
- Shower, have breakfast, head to the office
- ...

Following my usual routines generally helps me get out of a rut. I hope the suggestions I posited in this article and on my blog may be of help to those not only in the regional studies field but more broadly, in academia!