



Inspirational Writing for Academic Publication

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Explore, Experiment, Find Out

The key to starting inspirational writing is to write. And then write some more. This chapter introduces an unfailingly effective strategy which is straightforward and enjoyable. How to reread writing, possibly sharing it with others, and keeping a research journal are also covered.

Seamus:



Where do I start? I like the idea of experiment and exploration. That's how I often approach new ideas with my students. Perhaps I need to play a bit with writing. But how?

Helena:



Well, in design we use all sorts of techniques to help find out what we want to express and how and why (see, I'm using the tin-opener questions!). So perhaps a good way of starting to write might be NOT to focus yet, but allow myself to write the equivalent of a sketchbook, storyboard and mood-board. Phew that would be a relief.

And then perhaps I can share and discuss it all with others. Perhaps I could continue doing that throughout all the writing phases and stages. Is this where a reflective research journal comes in? I could keep notes of where I've got to and all my thoughts and feelings?

Lee:



I'm beginning to struggle. I nearly stopped reading when Gillie wrote about that novel. But I can see what Stephen meant about the interesting form of his chosen book, I think. I need help with my discussion section. I must express what I think is essential about my research. I've never done this before. It has always been done by another member of the team.

(Continued)



(Continued)

Joseph:



I always write what I want to say, but then I find when I submit a paper it gets rejected and the reviewers often miss the whole point of what I'm getting at. I hope this chapter shows me how to see if my ideas are understandable to others before I get to the stage of submission.

Starting Out

Experienced writers write an awful lot more words than they publish, bearing in mind that the waste paper basket (or delete button, or command to open a new file and abandon the old) is the writer's best friend. Words are expendable. We might initially use far more detail than necessary, for example, or too much from the raw data. At the time this enabled a full exploration of the issues and elements. Later these could be pared down straightforwardly. This process is far from a waste of time, as greater understanding of the issues has been constructively gained.

We learn to write by writing. Intending every written word to be destined for publication is a route to failure. The effective writing process is one of exploration and experimentation, of trying out and then trying again, and then again. And then the subject of research can seem to open out, as the poet Robert Frost found with his writing:

The delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew ... Step by step the wonder of unexpected supply keeps growing.

(Frost, 1972: 440–1)

The strategy described in this chapter is straightforward: it enables me to engage fully with the 'tin-opener' questions introduced in Chapter 3. It is to explore what I know, understand, think and feel about subjects I tackle, as fully and in depth as possible. This sort of writing could be thought of as initial exploratory notes, which might not read like academic writing yet. This germinal stage, which need never be read by anyone else, focuses wholly on the content of what needs to be said, experimenting with and exploring ideas, theories, descriptions and connections. Through this process the writer also finds and learns to use their own individual writing voice confidently and clearly. Redrafting this explorative writing for the appropriate academic readership belongs to the second phase. Here is a writing course member's initial reaction to this:

I am interested in all this and somewhat relieved but also a little disbelieving:

- Surely academic writing is not supposed to be understandable
- Surely I am not allowed to be intuitive
- Most of all, surely no one will want to hear what I want to say in a way that makes sense to me.

So, like learning a new language, writing appears to be more about having the confidence to get started, keep going, and the courage to give it to someone else to read.

One issue is understandability. It seems that dense, incoherent language is the order of the day in many academic publications. There is a sort of upman(person)-ship in many big (need a dictionary/thesaurus to understand) words being used. Also points are awarded for very long sentences that take sharp turns, meander a bit longer and then arrive somewhere but nowhere.

A little like that last sentence!

(Academic writing course member)

Many authorities strongly advocate beginning with a plan, rather than the Phase 1 type writing recommended in this chapter. There may well be some focused narrow-range projects which would benefit from being kept on the rails thus. Phase 1, 2 and 3 type writing is advocated by Stephen and I as it can lead to writing which is inspirational to write and inspirational to read. And here are some positive reactions to these methods:

I appreciated learning how to start writing without being so stressful of the content and organisation, and let my writing flow with very interesting results.

I'm left with a surprisingly 'light' mind, with lots of room for new thinking and creativity. This *is* a surprise – not expected, but really exciting.

It's tiring actually, which surprised me.

(Academic writing course members)

This chapter explains fully how to do Phase 1 writing, and then how to work on it towards more focused writing. It concludes with advice on developing appropriate and constructive attitudes to writing, by engaging in Phase 1 type of writing regularly: this could be called a personal research journal.

Write to Learn

The free writing was always helpful; it enabled fresh problems to emerge, that I addressed in further free writing.

Writing freely without structure was a great thing to learn. It seemed natural, although I had never done it before. It made writing the points clearly and easily without being limited with the structure.

(Academic writing course member)

Here's how this first explorative stage of writing works. Good news about this method is that it doesn't need very much time to come up with results.

Free write for at least *six minutes* before settling down to write properly. I write whatever comes into my mind in whatever order, even if it's totally non-academic. This can identify the doors that need closing in my mind (see Chapter 1), perhaps by listing pressing concerns which I can return to later, or working out what I am anxious about. I can then create a time-slot later in the day for safely opening that door and letting the mayhem of personal issues out when I have time and patience to deal with them. This method also gets words going in a really straightforward way. The blank page or screen is the most scary thing to any writer. So even if none of these words is valuable for the current project, the mind has begun to limber up for writing and words are coming out. AND – sometimes – startlingly valuable inspirations occur during this initial write.

Initial writing – 6 minute 'dump'

At the moment I feel the urge to pee. But I can't go because I've gone already and people might look at me funny. I am also very hungry and wondering when we might eat, and also what we will eat.

Like learning a new language, writing appears to be more about having the confidence to get started, keep going, and the courage to give it to someone else to read.

Which brings me to my next point – the importance of being in the correct place for myself, with people who 'get me', what I am doing and where I come from.

Perhaps the issues about the difficulty of collaboration is that people do not (usually) come from the same place, but almost defensively actually work hard at coming from different places often not to improve the writing, but rather to put their point of view across rather than yours.

(Anon)

In this most basic initial writing method, the *Six Minute Write*, words determine where they want to go. Reading them afterwards, I find out what I've said, and quite often what I think, believe, understand, know. This follow-the-flow-of-my-mind, key to all writing, is the secret to mining some of the riches of the mind, which can otherwise get overlooked. I think about it a great deal during the whole writing process, but have to write it otherwise it slips out of my consciousness again. Every writer needs to explore and experiment with the kind of writer they are, making as few as possible prior assumptions about themselves and their abilities and requirements.

For this very first stage writing we invent our own rules; it is ours to do what we want. Nobody else is going to see it unless I decide they may, so it's OK if it only makes sense to me. If I want someone else to read it, I can redraft, cut out or alter later. Here is one experienced writer's reflection on free writing:

Two middle-aged women walk unsteadily on the pebbles towards the waves. Gulls have scattered the rubbish around, hunting for plunder. The two women wade deeper and deeper until they're both striking out, swimming in the morning, their heads above the waves. Learn from that. The words come how and when they choose, and only then can I shape them. I want to honour that mystery, that sense of my writing making its own rules, and I the servant of those lines. I need to honour the silences too: they have their place. Words help me make sense of the brambles where I try to carve a path.

(Robert Hamberger)

Writing out half-formed thoughts and plans helps find out what I think, and what I still need to discover. It is for myself only; this way I can grasp the slippery beginnings of ideas and not worry if they appear muddled: I know the time for sorting them out is not yet. They *need* to be unconstrained initially; a researcher risks limiting their research by overdetermining their findings. Whether the publication presents clinical quantitative data or reports an action research study, important lines of argument and logical narrative sequence often emerge from what might initially seem confusion.

Such writing requires courage, but then writing does anyway. This is a strategy which can help us think through what we want to say, know, think and feel. Here are the thoughts of three writers new to free writing:

6 minutes gives me a transcendent space; peaceful; helpful to think I can return there any time.

I found I really enjoyed free writing for 6 minutes. It was very useful just to clear my thoughts, develop ideas, or even just to dump.

Phase 1: Write for Myself

I think the 6 minutes free writing is a place to go; I want to get familiar with it so I can go there to stretch my ideas. I have always wondered where people get their stated ideas from. And this is the place for me where I can anchor my ideas. It's also a place where they can be born and nurtured.

(Academic writing course members)

And it can be very helpful to reread this writing fairly quickly. A symptom of early-stage writer's block is feeling a strong emotion against rereading writing. It is well worth struggling against this inhibition. Though some just don't realise how important it is:

It surprised me that I never realised I never read my writing back immediately. I found it so beneficial when I did.

(Academic writing course member)

Stephen

Perhaps my most significant impression from thirty years of refereeing academic papers is that it is really pretty boring. I don't usually like to admit that because I also believe it is very important. A referee has the powerful role of 'gatekeeper' to knowledge, letting some in, shutting others out, not to be taken lightly.

The role of thesis examiner is even more important: a career can hang upon it. Although reading a thesis can be exciting, I have felt it to be at times a boring duty. Because theses are much longer than academic papers, the author really needs to engage the reader.

The texts which keep away the boredom and remind me of my importance as examiner or referee are those where I am convinced the writer learnt from the process of shaping their ideas. This is communicated in the vibrancy of their voice, and cannot be faked. Reading such writing I feel I am playing a part in someone else's discoveries. That really is powerful: the antipathy of boredom.

In my experience, the early phase – whether a *six minute* splurge or a more extended but nevertheless immediate writing – is often when I become aware that I am learning something. It is here that new patterns emerge, new connections are made and I realise that I am on to something. The inevitable sense of excitement, urgency and life of such learning, often born in the early stages of writing, is like the soul of the text, to be reshaped and refined to emerge eventually as the fully fledged paper.

I think it is this vibrancy that affects me as referee or examiner. Then I am hooked, and I will immediately be favourably disposed towards the paper's eventual acceptance, or the thesis being passed.

How to Start

Here is a strategy for beginning each writing session with a constructively open, enquiring and adventurous attitude. It involves a very brief (six minutes) free-flow write, followed by more focused writing. Beginning every writing period with the *six minutes dump* writing generally facilitates greater depth and width, or greater insight into the theories and material under current consideration.

- Take whatever materials feel good for today; this might be very different one time from another.
- Choose where to sit, the most attractive place at the time: under a tree, at the kitchen table, somewhere miles from home or office, or of course at that academic desk, with your tea/coffee beside you and the phone and mobile switched OFF.
- Choose also a peaceful time with at least twenty minutes UNINTERRUPTED, and ALONE.
- Settle comfortably.
- Write on a new sheet of paper or screen (preferably the former).
- Allow thoughts and ideas to settle into a still pool of silence, with no specific subject. Ignore all outside noises/sights/smells. Jot *anything* which occurs to the hand or fingers to put on the page or screen; try to be open – apposite thoughts will arrive next to irrelevant ones. No one need see these notes, and you don't yet know what will lead to what. Allow the writing to write itself for at least six minutes WITHOUT STOPPING, without rereading, and as far as possible without thinking about it. Try not to sit and think AT ALL before beginning: put the pen or pencil on the paper and start writing, in mid-sentence if necessary: allow the hand on the paper to do the initial thinking.
- Our minds hop around, so well might this writing. Allow the words to fall onto the paper, particularly not trying to coerce them into anything academic; the more non-academic stuff which is dumped on the page at this stage, the freer the mind will be to focus in a few minutes' time. What is written in this six minutes might be descriptions; shopping lists, moans about traffic, weather, children, colleagues; an account of something that happened; last night's dream; work or dinner plans: a startling solution to your theory problem; it doesn't matter what it is. Don't stop to question anything: write without thinking.
- We don't think in sentences or logical sequences, so neither might this writing. Only include punctuation, correct grammar and spelling which occurs naturally. FOLLOW the FLOW for six minutes.
- If it gets stuck, just rewrite the last sentence, or look up and describe the surroundings.
- Do this without stopping for six minutes. Write whatever is in your mind. Allow anything to come in any form – scurrilous, moaning, disparate ideas – odd phrases, half sentences, lists – anything. Remember no one else need read it.

Phase 1: Write for Myself

- Whatever we write will be right for now, even if it seems to be merely a list of the rubbish and worries at the top of the mind. If what comes is useful to the current project, and it quite often is, we might want to change things later, perhaps remembering better or having rethought. Or the spelling punctuation and grammar might be far from perfect. None of these things matter for now; what matters is letting out now what I think, feel, know, remember, wonder, believe. With this kind of open approach it's impossible to think of such explorative expression as essentially wrong.

After the six minutes is up, without pausing much, and without rereading the *six minutes dump* yet, begin some more focused follow-up writing. This might be continuing from where the writing was left at the previous writing session, or a new subject which has been thought of beforehand. If there is no obvious writing theme, posing a query about the subject of the current writing, by using one of the tin openers (see p. 34), can lead to really useful material.

- Begin to write about your subject, but allow the thoughts to appear on the paper in whatever order (or seeming disorder) they want, similar to the *six-minute writing approach*. Allow your hand(s) to write unhindered by your interfering brain. Do this for fifteen minutes.
- Carry on writing in whatever way seems right, until your hand aches too much to continue.
- Reread and reflect: note down your reflections.
- Now you can begin to organise your writing. If you feel the *six minutes dump* hasn't really worked on this occasion, put it on one side and try again another day: our minds don't work to order. Reread all the writing from both days (the first is probably a great deal more useful – inspirational even – than you'd feared).
- This way of beginning to write can be used for any type of writing: reports, academic papers, professional articles, poetry ...
- Using this way of writing, keep notes all through the writing process: of your research, aspects of work you'd like to communicate to others. Writing in the above way, allowing yourself to write whatever comes, will capture vital facts, observations, inspirations, images, thoughts, ideas ...
- Include things colleagues/patients say (dialogues even); notes from readings or other texts (think widely); accounts, stories of experience from now or the past, yours or recounted ones of others.
- Listen; peel all six senses. Ideas will come from odd sources – inside or out.

Six minutes writing

This weekend we are going to Queensberry in Central Otago for two days of sunshine and gardening. We will check on the lettuces and tomatoes hoping that there hasn't been a late frost. Last year the tomatoes were almost

ruined by a severe frost in November, but managed to revive themselves from small remaining shoots. They produced many large, delicious tomatoes much to our surprise. My peonies are all up, but I suspect that they won't flower because I shifted them recently. Peonies can be very sulky and temperamental.

(Tracy Rohan)

Two sets of six minute free-flow writing

Right now I have been asked to write, to create, to learn. This process of writing down is contrary to how I have written before because of my need to prove, deliver, excite, justify, and this is why I become stuck. I get stuck because this is another system, like another solar system of thoughts that give greater expression. Another question I raise, is this new system opening my brain power, reactivating my neurons or is it just relaxing and letting myself construct? There you are!!! Asking questions and using words and constructs I am familiar with and who knows what I am missing out on by rethinking these old concepts. Maybe I need to toss them out.

I am starting another six minutes writing, six years later, about where I have progressed in my writing. I have discovered it is an 'initiation period' and the results are something fundamental, even if I have to mould the meanings and statements further. It is a way for me to hear what I have to say and move beyond the circular.

We talk about stepping stones, but these moments were like walking through a river with rolling stones under foot and eventually I would feel my feet, my strength and balance to carry on. I often think about how meditation is described; as a deepening of thoughts, as a stone dropping and eventually effortless and pleasurable. I really want this to happen with my writing, editing and rewriting.

(Lynley Deaker)

Why SIX minutes flow-of-the-mind writing? I can't remember, as I began many years ago. Five was too short and seven not right somehow. Six minutes is one-tenth of an hour, and ten the natural human numerical base (the word digit means both number, and finger or toe). Three more lots of six minutes would be a twenty-four-minute write: a good normal concentration length.

One of the secrets of writing is to keep doing it even when there seems to be nothing there, because:

Phase 1: Write for Myself

- writing, just as life, offers a muddle of the good, the bad and the boring: it might seem dull one minute, and full of vitality and significance the next;
- things hold different meanings at different times: a piece of writing might seem irrelevant or nondescript one day: but prove insightful later.

Rereading and Possibly Sharing the Writing

Rereading the *six minute dump*, as well as the more focused writing, can be very useful as these words were written at speed and relatively thoughtlessly, so it may contain surprisingly valuable elements. It can then be redrafted or edited, of course. Its contents might be entirely memorable, or, as it is a relatively painless way of helping words appear on the page or screen, they might seem not sufficiently useful to reread. This initial *six minute dump* scribble can be left unread, if that feels right.

What's next? More writing on another day of course. When involved in creating Phase 1 writing, it is most helpful to feel it is private and not to be shared. Later, however, finding the right colleague or peer to read it with, or at least discuss the ideas, can take thinking further. If it feels appropriate, someone else may see it with insight from a refreshingly different point of view, and perceive links, connections, developments, divergent perspectives or tangents.

Phase 1 writing probably will not be ready to be read critically in depth. Its lack of structure and grammatical form, because of the way it was created, makes it more appropriate for open discussion of its content and where the emerging ideas might lead. At its extreme Phase 1 might be completely unreadable by someone else (mine certainly is, and not only because it's in pencil). In such cases, a discussion about the ideas and concepts, or examples it has raised would be fruitful, rather than the other person or people reading the actual text.

These first discursive, supportive, confidential readers need to be chosen with care. We need to trust that they:

- Understand, and are happy to work with, the nascent nature of Phase 1 writing;
- Can be tentative and exploratory themselves;
- Can be relied upon to be confidential;
- Will treat my writing and ideas with respect, however wild and wacky and unformed they are at this stage.

This person, or small group, can become very significant within our writing lives. Communicating with my own first readers (different people for

different genres) takes much time and care; I know the manuscripts I send out to publishers are qualitatively better in a range of ways than if they had not been through the careful hands of these much respected individuals. These relationships are reciprocal: I also read and comment on their manuscripts prior to publication.

Stephen

This is really important. I have often returned a proposed paper with the recommendation that the author ask a colleague to read it through. This applies at the early phases of writing as well as the final editing phase.

But many academics work in institutional environments with no such culture of collegial collaboration. I have worked in some departments where it is natural enough to ask a colleague down the corridor to read something and talk it through. But in others it can even be quite embarrassing to ask someone to help you out in this way. This is an important part of what is meant by a good research environment. It may be that there is little the individual can do about this. But it may be that one can take the initiative and set up a collaborative relationship with a colleague (or a small group) for the mutual support of writing.

Start a Reflective Research Journal

A *reflective research journal* is really no more than a holdall in which to throw and store ideas, concepts, quotes, musings and reflections. Some of the thoughts which course through us while we, say, conduct interviews or other data-gathering exercises, can be inspired. Yet if we don't grab them and write them down they are often lost. We all know what it's like to wake in the night trying to recapture that significant thought, and only manage to grasp the feeling of the idea. Well, if the research journal had been on hand at the time, or very soon after, it would have been recorded to be developed later.

The capacious holdall bag of the *research journal* can be ransacked for its gems at any time. It is not necessarily comprehensible to other readers as it is probably written in a Phase 1 type way. The ideas and concepts expressed and explored within it can however, as discussed above, be shared with the right carefully chosen reader(s).

Having gained strategies which open writing up and set it flowing, we turn in the next chapter to ones which help when we feel hopelessly blocked.



Don't just read: WRITE!

Here are activities that will help you move from thinking about writing to actually doing it.

- 1 Write (preferably on paper) in a free-flow way with no specific subject for *six minutes*, dumping whatever is in your mind onto the page. Do it every morning for at least a week. This is also a very effective way to begin every writing session (see above for full explanation and examples).
- 2 After each *six minute dump* writing session follow with at least ten minutes of focused writing. This might be about a theme you have planned beforehand, or it might be something which has arisen during the *six minutes* (see above for a full explanation).
- 3 Start a *Research Journal*. You might do this writing by hand in a notebook, or in a separate computer file. Use the *six minute* writing method, allowing yourself to reflect onto the page about any aspect of your research. Don't worry if it seems to diverge from being strictly about your research: you will perceive the relevance later.
- 4 Write about a time when you had an inspiration or moment of insight in your research, an experience relative to this publication. It could even be from ages ago. Allow yourself to write about the first occasion which comes to mind, or rather to hand; tell it as a narrative or story, putting in as much description and detail as seems to arise as you write: you will see the relevance of all this when you reread it later.
- 5 Write about your research in a:
 - poem
 - fairy story
 - detective story
 - whodunit
 - comedy or pantomime
 - small children's story
 - mindmap (see www.mindmapping.com)
 - collage of pictures cut from magazines
 - drawing
 - if your research were an animal, or a piece of furniture, or a food: what would it be? Write a descriptive paragraph or more (see above for more advice on this strategy).
 - collect quotes that strike you from any source for a few days; can you incorporate them into your research; do they throw any light?
- 6 If you were stranded on a desert island, what would your essentials for writing be? Time would no longer be a problem. Allow yourself to dream. Write it as a story if you like.

And READ some more:

Bartholomae, D. (1985) 'Inventing the university', in M. Rose (ed.), *When a Writer Can't Write: Studies in Writer's Block and Other Composing Process Problems*. New York: Guilford. pp. 273–85.

Elbow, P. (1987) 'Closing my eyes as I speak: An argument for ignoring audience', *College English*, 49 (1): 50–69.

Academic writing is a special way of writing that pays particular attention to precision, the avoidance of ambiguity and disciplinary knowledge. This way of writing needs to be mastered in order to communicate research effectively. On the other hand, it may be that this very concern for a 'special' way of writing needs to be set aside so that we can gain a more straightforward sense of our meaning. Bartholomae emphasises the former view and Elbow the latter. Phase 1 writing is closer to Elbow's perspective, while the later editing phase acknowledges Bartholomae's view of academic 'discourse'.

Peseta, T. (2007) 'Troubling our desires for research and writing within the academic development project', *International Journal for Academic Development*, 12 (1): 15–23.

Research writing is increasingly valued in terms of its usefulness. This paper argues against this dominant assumption to consider other purposes.