

Tips for writing – or: how to turn transpiration into inspiration

A famous saying goes that writing is 5% inspiration and 95% transpiration. But what to do when the inspiration just doesn't want to come? It's easy: invoke your transpiration to produce text which will result in inspiration or make inspiration easier at other moments. Here are some tips for doing that. Rather than 'writing a paper, chapter, thesis or book', which can be an overwhelming task, focus on small chunks of actions, such as:

A. On inspired days, focus on content:

- Write down a passage in bulleted lists without worrying about nice sentences
- This bulleted list can be an executive summary of what you want to say in this paper
- Eg by writing down something you explained to the class you are teaching, or to a friend or at a lecture you gave, or by planning your class or lecture by making slides for a presentation -> copy-paste the text from your presentation into your manuscript
- Worry about details later
- Keep track of references by eg mentioning (author, year?) -> eg year to be looked up later, *but* insert detailed references later

B. On less inspired days:

- edit the text from the more inspired days:
- Turn a bulleted list from an inspired day in a nice text with full sentences
- Insert full references

C. On days when you don't know where the text should be heading:

- Write down a structure of your text
- Revise structure
- Reorganize existing text by copy-pasting it into revised structure

D. On days where you are into problem solving:

- Insert details
- If you can't solve all details today, mark them with color or [...] to remind yourself to work on them on even more problem-solving minded days
- Solve marked problems from previous writing rounds
- Only go into details that are really needed for what you want to say; if not relevant: leave out – it's your manuscript, you are in charge.

E. On days when you are studying other authors' work that is relevant for your own work:

- Take notes of their ideas
- If you agree with them: show how your work builds on their work, what you add to their work or to the literature
- If you disagree with them: argue why you disagree with another author (in case of vagueness: on the most charitable interpretation), or show that they are right with a possible objection against your view but that it's actually not a problem, or agree with them and use this to make your argument better / more clear, etc
- If they are vague, it's their problem, not yours, in other words: try to interpret them as charitable as possible but show that they are not clear
- Organize (possible) objections from others against your account into clusters
- Copy-paste into structure of your text
- Work on these objections on D-days

F. On days where none of A-E works:

- Update your manuscript by copy-pasting fragments from draft notes (fragments of papers, grant proposals, lectures etc) etc into it.
- Make a status update of your progress, per section of your manuscript. Which parts are (almost) done, which are half done, which contain fragments, which are blank? Provide for a nice color scheme and see how you are actually making progress without noticing it.
- Update your time schedule. You might see that even though you are behind on some parts, you are actually ahead of your schedule on other parts, eg because some fragments go into other parts than planned.
- Take a break. Talk to a friend or stranger about your work. Summarizing your main ideas to an outsider might help you get a clearer view on what the basic ideas are that you want to focus on.

G. How we can help each other:

If you comment on other people's work, remember that *writing is hard*. We need each others' critical feedback, but we also need each other's appreciation. Give each other compliments if their texts inspire you. Tell them. Your appreciation is the fuel that keeps another author going.

In general: Set aside writing time for yourself. Turn off or disregard your email to not be distracted. Turn on nice music or make it really quiet. Write while in the office. (But sometimes: at home. Or at the beach. Or in a café. Or on a train/plane/airport. Or in the library. Whatever works. As long as you write.) Be a part of your department by being at the office, as it is important to see each other for support (see G) and sharing ideas and experiences. Try to write every single day by picking a task from the list above and trying to focus on this for say 2 hours. If you have energy for more, do more. If you only have 1 hour, pick a small task from this list that fits your state of mind. As long as you keep busy. All these tasks are important, so don't feel bad if you don't do an A-task but rather a B-task. The B-tasks will have to happen anyway, so be proud of yourself when you turned an uninspired writing day into a productive day by simply drawing on transpiration rather than inspiration. And even the F-days might turn out to be crucial for the development of your ideas. Taking a break from writing can be extremely productive. Just make sure that F-days are the exception and the other days are the rule. And don't underestimate your influence on others, so also take G very seriously. Spend the rest of your research time reading and looking for literature, but don't get lost in the endless amounts of literature. Update this list with whatever tricks you can think of yourself. Make it easy for yourself. Writing can be a lot of fun, but when it's not, you can force it a bit with such tricks. Good luck!!!

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