

*"It's plotted out. I just have to write it."*

# A Practical Perspective on Academic Writing

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Second year research paper seminar  
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- Introduction
- A Thesis as a writing process
- Writing process & creating a writing habit

## Today's Agenda



Write down:  
**3 – 10 reasons for  
why you can't/don't write**



# My introduction: Researcher

- Researcher and writing coach at the Department of Management Studies
- Academic background:
  - Master's in Social Psychology (University of Helsinki, 2004)
  - PhD in Sociology (European University Institute, Florence, Italy, 2010)
- PhD research in Silicon Valley, California; visiting researcher at UC Berkeley
- Research topics: highly skilled professionals' global mobility, distributed & virtual work, work engagement



# My introduction: Writing coach

- Writing enthusiast and coach: academic writing coaching (individuals and groups), courses and workshops
- Full courses at Aalto University, for example:
  - Essential Academic Skills: Producing Text and Giving Presentations (with Christa Uusi-Rauva)
  - Finding Joy and Productivity in Academic Writing
- Tohtoritakuu book and blog with Kimmo Svinhufvud (in Finnish): [www.tohtoritakuu.fi](http://www.tohtoritakuu.fi)



The way you understand writing can make  
an important difference  
in your experience of doing a PhD.



# What do we talk about when we talk about (academic) writing?

- The text?
  - The Genre: academic thesis, academic research article, funding proposal, etc.
- Getting published?
  - Tricks of the trade



# What do we talk about when we talk about writing?

- The process
  - Academic research as a writing process
  - Different stages, different kinds of writing
- The practicalities
  - Time & place
  - Goal setting
- The challenges
  - Cognitive issues: harmful, rigid beliefs about (academic) writing
  - Emotional issues: feelings related to writing
  - These related to: writer's block, procrastination...

*-> How to approach writing so that you can be productive and happy about your writing*



# My approach to writing support

Pragmatism:

What actually happens

What actually works

It is practical to

- look at academic writing as a creative process
- address psychological/emotional aspects of writing
- discuss concrete issues, such as writing goal setting, time management



# My approach to writing support

- Writing is, above all, **doing**
  - You deal with writing challenges by writing, not by avoiding writing
  - *In general*: the more you do it, the easier it becomes -> writing habit
  - Yet: experienced writers also face challenges and struggle with writing (and this is normal)



1. (Understand the nature of academic texts and the tricks of the publishing process)
2. (Hone your language skills)
3. Approach your thesis as a writing project
4. Understand writing as a process
5. Develop a writing habit: write every day

How to become a  
(relatively)  
happy and  
productive  
academic writer?



# A PhD as a writing process

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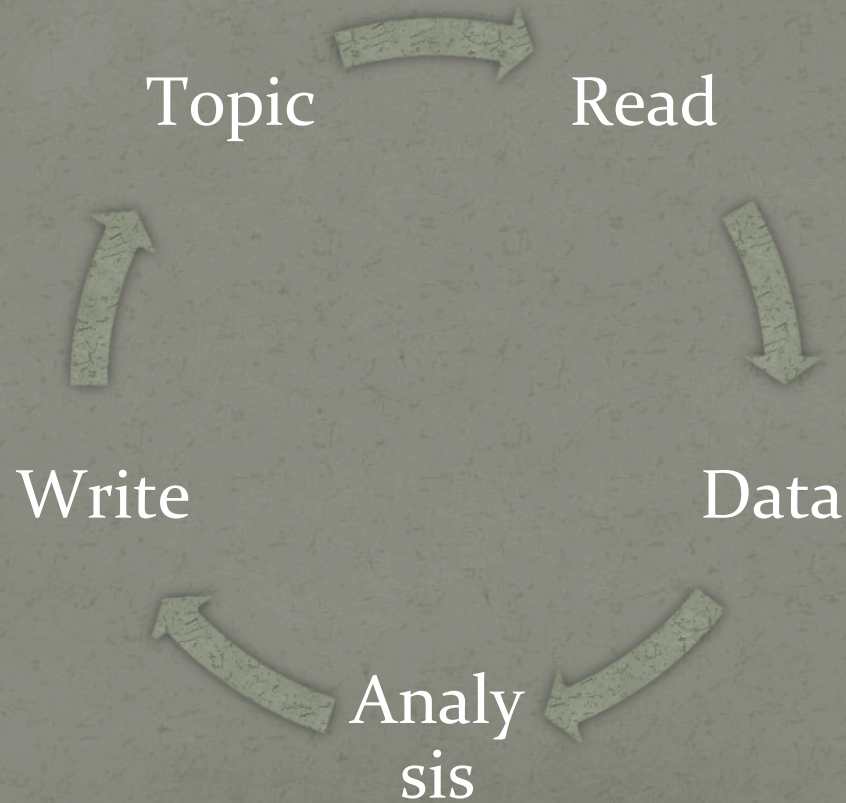


# Research process: A Linear model





# Research process: A Circular model





# Writing at every stage of the research

- Creating ideas
- Planning
- Taking notes
- Tool for thinking
  - Finding out what you think
  - Organizing thoughts
- Basis for discussion
- Reflection
- Getting unblocked
- Communicating your research (writing a dissertation)



# A PhD as a writing process

- **Research and reading** as part of the writing process  
-> *In order to write a PhD thesis, you need to read and do research*
- **Some key questions:**
  - What are the formal requirements for this particular type of writing (academic dissertation)?
  - What are the essential stages of the process?
  - What are my short and longer term goals?
  - How do I manage my writing on a daily basis?
  - At what stages is it useful to share my work and ask for feedback?



# Writing process

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# Myths about good writers

- Good writers don't show their unfinished drafts to others
  - Good writers start writing only after they reach the right mood or inspiration
  - Good writers start writing only after they have a new, creative idea
  - Good writers start writing only when they have a large, continuous block of time at hand
  - Good writers write finished versions at once
  - Good writers are born, not made
- (Svinhufvud 2007; see also Boice 1990)



Writing process:

“First you make a mess, then you clean it up.”

(Bolker 1998)



# A Two-step writing process: Creativity – Critical thinking (Elbow 1981)

“If you separate the writing process into two stages, you can exploit these opposing muscles one at a time: first be loose and accepting as you do your fast early writing; then be critically toughminded as you revise what you have produced. What you’ll discover is that these two skills used alternately don’t undermine each other at all, they enhance each other.”



# Freewriting

“Freewriting is the easiest way to get words on paper and the best all-around practice in writing that I know. To do a freewriting exercise, simply force yourself to write without stopping for ten minutes.

Sometimes you will produce good writing, but that’s not the goal. Sometimes you will produce garbage, but that’s not the goal either.”

(Elbow 1981, 13)

## The Benefits:

- Getting unblocked
- Warming up
- Finding out what you have to say
- Finding your own words; discovering and developing your personal voice
- Improving your writing
- Maintaining and strengthening your writing practice

(Based on e.g. Elbow 1981, Bolker 1998, Goldberg 1986, Cameron 2004)

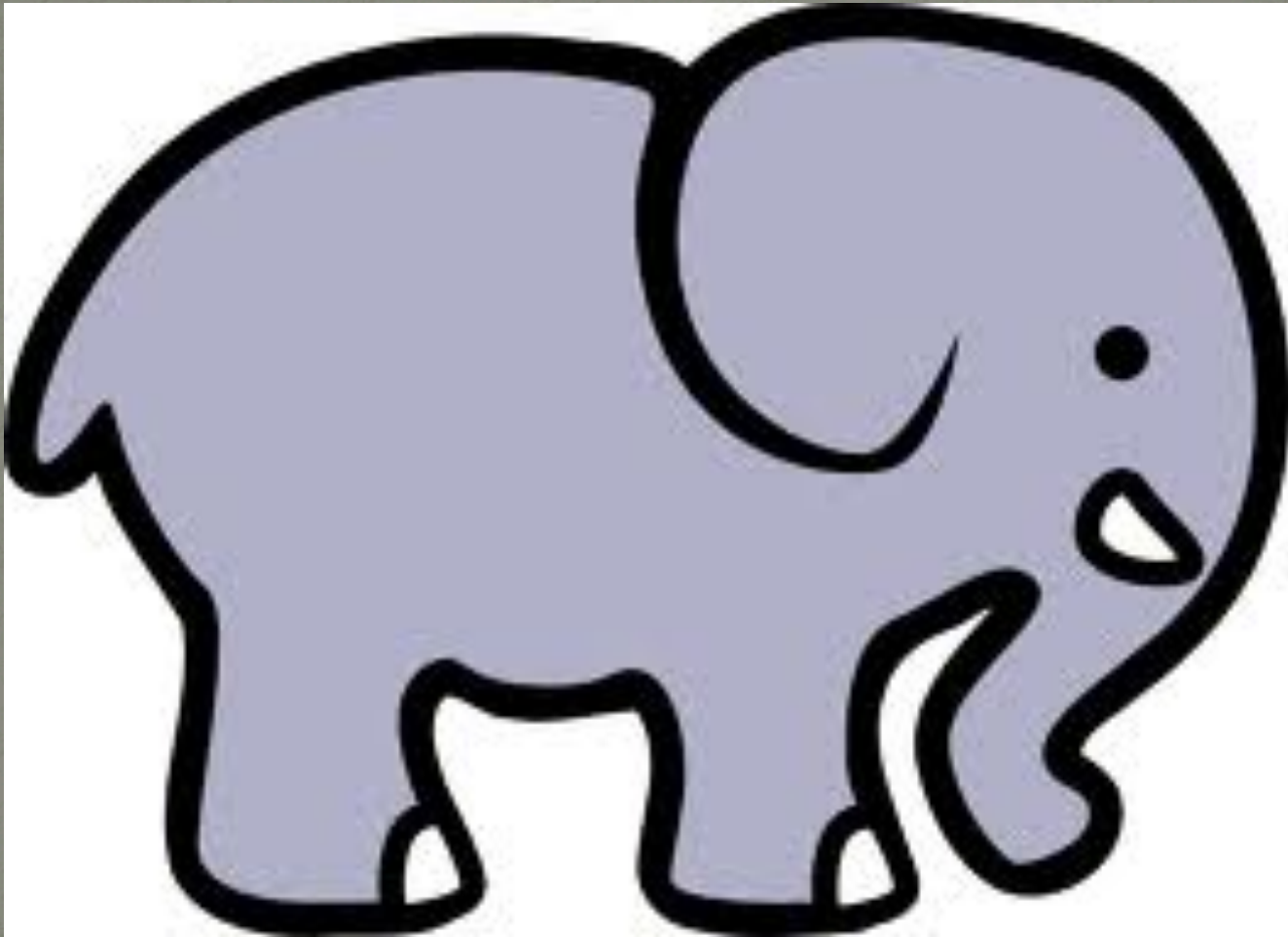


# Creating a Writing Habit

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How to eat an elephant?





# Creating a Writing Habit

## Basic principles:

- Approaching writing as a process (vs. one-time performance)
- Writing regularly (“Write every day”)
- Prioritizing writing (“*Write first*”)
- Utilizing small amounts of time
- Scheduling & planning (not waiting for inspiration)
- Using a timer
- Keeping a log
- Social support & accountability



# Creating a writing habit: Time & Place

- Where do you write?
- When do you write? (time of day, day of the week, within/outside regular working hours/days/semesters...)
- How often do you write?



*Freewrite for 5 minutes*

## **My academic writing habits**

Do I write as often as I would like?

When do I write?

Where do I write?

What would I like to change?





*"I wrote another five hundred words. Can I have another cookie?"*



# Creating a writing habit: Goal setting

Useful to define for yourself:

1. What is your longer-term, ultimate writing goal?
2. What are the different steps/milestones to get there (e.g. the first conference paper, the first chapter of a book, the first article for a Ph.D.)
3. What is your next, short term goal

And, the concrete steps to your next, short term goal:

**-> Daily writing goal**



Basic principle of setting writing goals:

## Realism

Don't set yourself up to fail  
Set yourself up for success



# Ways to set daily writing goals

- Time-based goals

- Amount of time every day
- Useful to break into small units (4 x 15 minutes; 3 x 30 minutes, etc.)
- Pro's: easy to plan, likely to start producing something eventually (combined with freewriting technique!)
- Con's: difficult to anticipate how much text you'll produce each day

- Text-based goals

- A certain amount of text each day (e.g. 300 words, 2 pages)
- Pro's: rewards fast writing, guarantees you produce something every day (freewriting also useful here)
- Con's: difficult to anticipate how long will take each day



# Ways to set daily writing goals

- Finishing a certain section of text
  - For example: writing a first draft of methods section of the article *or* finishing editing a certain (sub)section of your article/thesis
  - Applicable especially in the beginning when you need to produce an early draft and make progress (combined with freewriting)...
  - ... or at a final stage of a writing project when you are editing and/or finishing your text



# Short-term (daily, weekly) goals

- Specific & measurable
  - *You know exactly when you have reached the goal.*
  - E.g. time or word-based goals; indicating on the calendar the exact days and times when you will write
- Positive language
  - No: “I’ll *try to* write one page a day” or “I *hope* I’ll get more done on Wednesday”
  - Yes: “I will write a page a day”



# Exercise: Defining your goals

Write down:

1. Your long term writing goal
  - Name your writing project (e.g. thesis, research plan, article, conference paper)+ possible deadline or estimated time of completion
  - Time frame: months to years
2. Your shorter term goal
  - E.g. a first chapter of the thesis, a draft of your paper, a first description of data analysis, an article ready for journal submission
  - Time frame: weeks to a few months
3. Your daily writing goal for next week
  - The small, concrete steps to reach your short term goal