

# 7 Anti-procrastination Strategies for Academic Writers

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What is procrastination? Numerous definitions exist. But, almost all of them center on the idea of *voluntarily delaying or postponing an intended task by doing something else*. As the word ‘voluntarily’ indicates, procrastination is almost always deliberate. We know that it should be done, but we still postpone it, sometimes because of genuine reasons, but most often due to self-deception. Procrastination (borrowed from Latin word *procrastinatus*; *pro* – forward + *crastinus* – of tomorrow) becomes a habit when we practice putting something off until tomorrow what ought to be done today.

Writers, in general, are famous for procrastinating their writing.

Why would academic writers be any different, especially when there is an opportunity to justify it by keeping themselves busy with so many other activities?

But, why do we procrastinate? A number of causes have been attributed ranging from personality traits like low self-esteem to feelings of anxiety and fear about the outcome rooted in some sort of perfectionism (i.e., setting up an artificially high standard for oneself that is impossible to attain).

Research in psychology has shown that we especially like to procrastinate those tasks:

- that we are averse to
- that come with long-term rewards (don't we tend to indulge in those activities that yield immediate rewards?)
- we find to be boring

Most of us would associate all three characteristics with academic writing. So, is it even possible to overcome procrastination and get our writing done? Next, we'll consider some proven anti-procrastination strategies that have worked for many writers (academic or otherwise).

### **Strategy #1: Start very small and build on it (the 5-minute rule)**

If you try to make a giant leap forward right at the outset to beat writing procrastination, chances are that you may not be able to keep up your commitment on a daily basis. It is also possible that you may not get started at all because of the perceived pain and boredom associated with your big commitment.

So, start very, very small.

To start building your writing muscles, make a commitment that you'll write for 5 minutes every day at a scheduled time (if a daily commitment of writing 30 minutes scares you). This substantially weakens the mental resistance to even show up for writing at your scheduled time, because it is after all only 5 minutes. As you do this every day, you will gain confidence and be able to increase your daily writing duration in a short time. But again, don't make a big jump, but increase gradually only after you have achieved steadiness at the current level.

### **Strategy #2: Use If-Then planning**

One of the ways procrastination manifests is in the form of "I'll do it someday". In other words, you know very well that a task needs to be accomplished, but because you have not defined to yourself when you will accomplish it, it gets postponed forever and ever.

Research has shown that those who use ["If-then" planning](#) are far more likely to get things done than those who don't. The way it works is that you write down, "if X happens, do Y". For instance, "if it is 8 a.m. in the morning, write for 30 minutes". It is a powerful way to build a habit as well as to reinforce a habit. You could extend this by adding any anticipated scenario that may prevent you from completing this task. For instance, "if it is 8 a.m., and if I feel bored to write, I will take a brisk walk for 10 minutes". As you can see there is no room for negotiation here because you have clearly spelled out what you'll do when you are faced with potential obstacles to accomplish your writing task.

### **Strategy #3: Create a sense of urgency**

When you set a deadline for your writing project, you create a sense of urgency. Here you are focused on getting your writing done by the deadline you have set.

Don't mistake hyperactivity for productivity. That is why we must define our writing goal first. Refer to this article on setting S.M.A.R.T. writing goals.

Second, you determine how many pages you want to write and break that into small chunks of time/pages that spread over a specified duration (two weeks or three weeks). Then have a target for each day (i.e., complete 1000 words) and work towards it without fail. Creating a sense of urgency is very important to get a task accomplished.

The famous Parkinson's Law states that "work contracts to fit in the time we give it." So, if you have a deadline to submit your article in two weeks, you'll most likely complete it in 14 days. That's how it works. But, this last-minute binge writing causes a lot of anxiety and frustration and doesn't lead to a healthy writing habit.

Developing the healthy habit of writing in small chunks of time daily goes a long way in achieving the goal of steady and sustained productivity. One useful technique to implement this practice is the Pomodoro Technique. In this technique, you break down the time it will take for a massive task to be accomplished into small time intervals (typically 25 minutes in length) followed by short breaks. After four pomodori (plural for pomodoro), you get the reward of a longer break, anywhere from 15-30 minutes.

On a daily basis, you can create a sense of urgency by setting a timer every time you write.

#### **Strategy #4: Don't multi-task**

Multi-tasking is not going to help with our writing. Contrary to the opinion that we can be more productive by doing multi-tasking, studies have shown that only 2% of people can multi-task and the remaining 98% get distracted and become under-productive by multi-tasking. So, it is better to just focus on the task at hand using time-blocking systems like Pomodoro Technique, than get stressed out by trying to multi-task while doing our writing.

Similarly, try to resist the temptation to look up research articles or some information related to your project while writing. These days, it is very easy to indulge in online procrastination in the name of researching something. So, pro-actively schedule your online research time instead of letting it happen randomly, especially while writing.

#### **Strategy #5: Make yourself accountable**

When you are aware that you are being monitored, you are more likely to follow through on your commitments. This is a great tool to fight against procrastination in writing. You can either have a buddy or a partner to whom you can make yourself accountable to in terms of the progress you are making and how you are meeting the deadlines. You can also join a writing group in your university or join an online writing group to meet the same goal.

Apart from the primary benefit of helping you to become more accountable, joining a writing group offers you the opportunity to connect with other writers functioning in a similar

environment as you. It can help you overcome the imposter syndrome, feelings of frustration, isolation and shame that can often come in the way of productive writing.

### **Strategy #6: Reward yourself regularly**

Have some kind of a reward to motivate yourself to get your writing done.

We are already somewhat familiar with this idea of reinforcing non-preferred behaviors (that which we are averse to) with preferred behaviors (what which we like to do), which is known as the [Premack Principle](#) in the field of psychology. For instance, when we didn't want to do our homework, our parents told us that we get to go out and play for some time if we completed the homework. We happily complied and even got the homework done sooner to get to the thing that was of real interest to us.

So, until we find writing itself to be the reward, we do need some kind of reward to keep ourselves motivated and encouraged. The reward we choose doesn't have to be something extraordinary. Just identify some of the fun activities you already like doing and turn them into rewards for meeting your short-term and long-term writing goals.

### **Strategy #7: Develop a growth mindset**

Finally, don't constrain yourself by having fixed ideas about yourself and your abilities. It is not about getting it 100% perfect every time, but it is about making wise choices, getting it done and moving along. The perfectionist mindset doesn't allow us to grow. By adopting a growth mindset, you are prepared for so-called failure every time and more importantly, to learn some valuable lessons from it.