

Less Angst and More Fun: Writing Strategies and Writing Groups for Scholarship

Gail M. Sullivan, MD, MPH
Deborah Simpson , PhD
Lalena M. Yarris , MD, MCR

Nicole M. Deiorio , MD
Anthony R. Artino Jr , PhD

The Challenge

Many would dispute the saying, attributed to Mark Twain, “Writing is easy. All you have to do is cross out the wrong words.” Faculty may procrastinate or fail to write up scholarship, such as curricula or faculty development. Yet, writing is essential for presenting at meetings or publishing, which can bring personal satisfaction and enhance academic success. Faculty report writing barriers as: no time, negative past writing experiences, fear of criticism, inefficient writing habits that focus on perfection rather than production, and lack of mentors. Writing is often perceived as an important but low urgency priority.

What Is Known

Writing is a learned, not inherited, skill. Studies reveal that productive faculty write regularly, often in small bits of time rather than “bingeing.” They approach writing with calm emotions and confidence, regardless of actual writing quality. This confidence is linked to self-regulation skills that support writing: planning, setting goals, organizing, and self-monitoring. While writing, productive authors feel more relaxed and welcome criticism. In short, they write before they feel ready, as the act of writing advances their thinking.

To avoid a sense of isolation and create accountability, one strategy is to work with colleagues, particularly those with strengths that complement your own, whether in organization, time management, technology, analysis, or editing. Another approach, writing accountability groups, is associated with increased writing productivity and improved writing habits. Writing retreats (longer periods for writing, often away from one’s workplace) have been shown to increase productivity.

How You Can Start TODAY

1. **Identify a writing project:** Consider whether completed educational projects might have broad appeal beyond your local setting. For new projects, be proactive regarding institutional review board approval, aspects that facilitate wider dissemination, and potential collaborators. Ideally, writing starts at project start (eg, literature summary, methods outline, and reference management).

RIP OUT ACTION ITEMS

1. Stop procrastinating: use your existing or future projects as raw material and write a little each week.
2. Identify brief writing tasks and add these to your calendar with completion date, accountability strategy, and celebration of choice.
3. Approach writing positively, by identifying its personal value for you.
4. Find or create collaborative writing groups, writing accountability groups, or an accountability partner, to boost productivity, expand skills, and keep you on schedule.

2. **Focus on time management:** Intentionally calendar time for weekly writing, even for 15 to 30 minutes. Create a writing plan and add bite-size tasks into your calendar slots. Reframe writing as both important and urgent. Create time by addressing “time bandits” and do not give up your writing time easily (TABLE).
3. **Address procrastination and rationalization:** There will always be more literature to review and never “enough” time. Focus on how writing will benefit you, rather than viewing writing as just another task. Reward yourself after completing a writing step, such as with a walk or a new coffee flavor.
4. **Stop staring at a blank screen:** Just start writing. Write for a defined period, such as 10 minutes. If you are more comfortable speaking, turn on the transcript feature of your word processing software or dictate into your phone. Speak as if you are telling a colleague the story of your project. Use the transcript to jump-start writing.
5. **Write efficiently:** Rather than editing each sentence—seeking perfection—write without self-criticism or editing. Stop worrying about sentence structure or grammar. If you cannot think of a word, leave a space and write on. The goal is to get words down and edit later. A rough outline of your thoughts can help.
6. **When you are stuck:** Try free writing, writing to a prompt, or brainstorming. Free writing is writing thoughts on any topic. Consider writing a few sentences in a daily journal. To write to a prompt, ask yourself a question: Why am I drawn to this topic or project? Why were prior approaches not optimal? Try brainstorming with others about your ideas, with someone scribing or recording. Or start with a template, as most research writing uses similar formats.

TABLE
Just Do It!

Barriers	Strategies
Deal With Time Bandits Be mindful of socializing, social media use Batch email/mail, and turn off phones Cancel (or skip) a meeting Use templates for patient portal messages Triage message responses to staff Set expectations and boundaries for others, regarding availability Don't give up your time easily	Reframe: not task but your purpose Improve medical education—local, global Abstract or poster to organize your thinking Gain additional insights from your work Meet other people interested in the topic Manuscript to document your progress, lessons learned Get your work recognized
Rationalizations and Procrastinations I need to do review more literature I'm waiting for X to respond If only I had a day off to write I don't know how to write I need more coffee ...	Successful writers Higher confidence in ability to write Self-regulation: plan, set goals, organize, self-monitor Work without feeling "ready" Work regularly, short periods, each week Feel calm, with a sense of fun and discovery Welcome criticism Work efficiently

With section headers on the page, add your thoughts. To refresh thinking, get up and move. Then write—without engaging in favorite time bandits.

7. **Consider generative artificial intelligence (AI):** AI can assist with all writing phases—literature search and synthesis, data analysis, drafts, and editing. AI is also useful for word count reduction and for non-native language authors. AI is evolving so rapidly that recommendations are soon outdated. Current studies show that, while AI will gladly edit your work, it often produces dense and elaborate wording, without improving understanding, and may fabricate data and references. Always verify. You, not AI, are accountable.

What You Can Do LONG TERM

1. **Find an accountability writing buddy:** Share your calendared writing plan with a partner, who need not be in the same field or institution. Share each success with your partner.
2. **Find or create a writing accountability group:** In-person or virtual writing groups that meet at least monthly can be based around shared or individual projects. At meetings, individuals discuss their progress, snags, and solutions, and then engage in 30 or more minutes of communal writing, with a final wrap-up.
3. **Create a collaborative writing group for writing projects:** Writing can be lonely. Writing groups promote brainstorming, staying on schedule, sharing skills, and problem-solving. Members with different skills bring additional strengths. Use a shared document strategy to track the most recent version. Authorship order is best decided at the start, with clear responsibilities and consequences. Individuals can write different sections, or one author can take the lead with editing by others.
4. **Write in other formats to get your feet wet.** If you are examining the literature for a project, consider a

review paper. Try writing perspectives, letters to the editor, or creative writing articles.

References and Resources

1. Proulz CN, Rubio DM, Norman MK, Mayowski CA. Shut Up & Write!® builds writing self-efficacy and self-regulation in early-career researchers. *J Clin Transl Sci*. 2023;7(1):e141. doi:10.1017/cts.2023.568
2. Silvia PG. *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing*. 2nd ed. American Psychological Association; 2018.
3. Pitre CJ, Pugh CM. Reclaiming the calendar: time management for the clinician educator. *J Grad Med Educ*. 2023;15(1):117-118. doi:10.4300/JGME-D-22-00939.1
4. Johns Hopkins Medicine. Writing accountability groups (WAGS). Accessed May 16, 2025. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/faculty-development/career-path/wags>
5. Benjamin J, Masters K, Agrawal A, MacNeill H, Mehta N. Twelve tips on applying AI tools in HPE scholarship using Boyer's model. *Med Teach*. 2025;47(6):949-954. doi:10.1080/0142159X.2024.2445058



Gail M. Sullivan, MD, MPH, is Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of Graduate Medical Education* (JGME), Chicago, Illinois, USA, and Associate Director for Education, Center on Aging, and Professor of Medicine, University of Connecticut Health Center, Farmington, Connecticut, USA; **Deborah Simpson, PhD**, is Deputy Editor, JGME, Chicago, Illinois, USA, and Director of Education, Academic Affairs at Advocate Aurora Health, and Clinical Adjunct Professor of Family and Community Medicine, Medical College of Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, Madison, Wisconsin, USA; **Lalena M. Yarris, MD, MCR**, is Deputy Editor, JGME, Chicago, Illinois, USA, and Professor of Emergency Medicine, Oregon Health & Science University, Portland, Oregon, USA; **Nicole M. Deiorio, MD**, is Executive Editor, JGME, Chicago, Illinois, USA, and a Professor, Department of Emergency Medicine, and Associate Dean, Student Affairs, Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine, Richmond, Virginia, USA; and **Anthony R. Artino Jr, PhD**, is Deputy Editor, JGME, Chicago, Illinois, USA, and a Professor and Associate Dean for Evaluation and Educational Research, The George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences, Washington, DC, USA.

Corresponding author: Gail M. Sullivan, MD, MPH, University of Connecticut Health Center, Farmington, Connecticut, USA, gsullivan@uchc.edu