I only write when I have to. Because reasons. It’s just the way I write.

I used to invent the necessity in “have to.” “How will you fund the fourth year of your DPhil?” asked my graduate supervisor in October 1997. I was 23, fresh from an undergraduate degree; I had little Latin, less Greek. (Ha ha! I had no Greek.) I hadn’t read much English literature, come to think of it. “I will finish in three years,” I told her. “Good,” she said.

And because I had said it, I did it. Well, sort of: by October 2000 my thesis existed—not great, but fully footnoted at least.

To get to that point, I needed immediate deadlines as well as deep, energizing anxiety (fear I would not keep my word, fear I would disappoint, fear I would run out of funding). I gave my first year MSt qualifying paper at a conference: high pressure but good fun. After that I scheduled conference presentations for the rest of the thesis. There’s nothing like the prospect of giving a paper to “famous” academics to make you write a whole chapter about early printing on the train from Oxford to Glasgow.¹

Now, by the time I boarded that train, I had seen hundreds of early printed books and I had a database full of notes about them. I had some super OHPTs.² I even had some thoughts written down. This is because my advisors would leave fear-

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¹ Early Book Society Conference, July 1999, organized by the lovely Martha Driver and Jeremy Smith.
² A now defunct technology, remembered fondly by elderly people.
mongering notes in my pigeonhole: “come over for coffee” and such.³ Terrifying. I would respond defensively, with 5000 words. But it was the conference-going that was most fruitful. To this day, I do all the writing that really matters to me on the eve of a talk or while I am travelling to deliver it.

Gadding about also gave a productive shape to my academic life. I made friends. I realized how much I needed community. I joined societies, started collaborations, committed to publications, applied for library fellowships, organized a conference, and took on a big load of teaching (my favorite interlocutors are always students).

The end of October 2000 came, and I did have a thesis ready. But somehow I also did not. The argument seemed a bit wrong, and I did not have time to fix it, because I was occupied with all those other “necessities.”

So I stalled. I worked on the other stuff for months. Eventually one of my graduate teachers asked the question I was too scared to ask myself: “Alex, when’re you gonna hand that thang in?”⁴

Shame is even more productive than fear for me. I went straight home and revised 80,000 words in 19 days. I got about three hours of sleep per night. Towards the end I was so tired that I hallucinated a rat on a can of soup at Sainsbury’s. There he was: and then—oh dear! No rat. That was when I decided it really was time to hand the thang in.

None of this was healthy, but it was kind of…great. I had been thinking about problems with my thesis for six months. Solutions emerged in an exuberant rush. I wrote 3000–5000 words a day, including substantial new sections that I later published verbatim in Print Culture and the Medieval Author (Oxford, 2006).

Anyway, that was then. Now I am older (obviously). Various experiences have taught me that fear and anxiety are less necessary to me than I once believed. My professional position is no longer precarious. I have tenure, research funding, brilliant students, glorious colleagues.⁵

But—more accepting, middle aged, and extremely privileged—I still maintain the patterns I established as a graduate student. My time is completely, deliberately filled up. I am up to my teeth in teaching, supervising, grant writing, collaborative project management, commissioned essays, reviews. (I have some principles that guide my selection of activities: (1) Remember the rat! Leave time for sleep. (2) Prioritize kids and partner. (3) Avoid assholes.)

When I can squeeze time out of my schedule, I read and think. I inflict my thoughts on members of my research lab. I visit archives, usually just for a day or two. I scribble ideas down in a notebook. I contribute tl;dr comments to Facebook threads.

And then I write—but only when I have to. A wee while ago, I wrote 6000 words in six hours, so I could send them all to Maura Nolan.⁶ This was a lot, even for me. But—Maura Nolan! I’d write 6000 words for Maura any day.

What is to be learned from this? I’m not sure. This essay is very much about me (me, me, me). I offer it mainly because, in a recent Facebook conversation, younger colleagues expressed their belief that all “successful” academics—i.e. the lucky ones with jobs and time to publish—were steady-as-she-goes, 300-words-a-day people. Well, not me.

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³ My advisors were Anne Hudson and Helen Cooper, and they were unfailingly generous in every way.

⁴ Those who know him will recognize the Texan twang of Ralph Hanna III, for whose encouragement I am thankful.

⁵ Including Suzanne Conklin Akbari, who with Michael Collins, ITM, and my fellow contributors to this book created the space for this discussion.

⁶ So she could respond to my paper for the Digital Premodern Symposium, May 2014, hosted by Claire Waters and Amanda Phillips, with help from Seeta Chaganti and Colin Milburn. Thanks to them all: I had a blast and got a book chapter out of it!
I suppose my advice about writing is not actually about writing. It’s more about “being”:

- Learn who you are, and then be that more, instead of thinking, always, that you are meant to be less.

- Be grateful, if you can be.7

- Practice patience and empathy with yourself and others. (However, do reserve a little hostility for assholes.8)

- You are okay, and it will be okay (or else it won’t be okay, and that will be okay too).9 Once you truly believe that, writing and all manner of things will be well.

7 I do not say “be grateful” lightly. There are things in my life for which I am far from grateful. But I am grateful for what is. I am all good! And so are the people I love. I learned a lot about this (rather to my surprise) from http://thework.com/ (h/t: the wonderful Andrea Bonsey).

8 It is possible to distinguish assholes from people who are just having a little tizzy. Assholes are the ones dumping on people under and around them (but never above them). They seem to be in a lot of pain, but their pain takes an ugly and destructive form. Be empathetic; that will allow you to see that their assholery is not about you. But do not waste your emotional energy on an asshole. And do bear in mind that many of us have internalized others’ assholery so completely that we are assholes to our Self, which makes us especially vulnerable to the asshole Other. Some of my colleagues have—flatteringly—compared my own approach to assholes with that of the honey badger (as in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4r7wHMg5Yjg). Certainly when it comes to assholes, it is best not to give a single shit.

9 The poet Kate Camp wrote those words down for me on a scrap of paper and gave them to me as farewell gift when I left New Zealand in 1997. I carried it round in my wallet until I finished the DPhil, when I passed it to a friend. But it took me another decade to understand what she meant.