How We Write: Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blank Page

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Writing Regularly

Generally the advice I give on writing has been along the lines of saying “there is no one correct way to write, but there are plenty of ways people seem to be stuck in that are not working well for them.” This can then lead into a discussion of different people’s writing strategies, with their peculiarities, conventions, strengths and weaknesses, which may suggest things that others might find helpful, or at least worth giving a try. Such events—workshops on publishing or writing, for example—can be really helpful, and to put something similar down in book form seems a really good idea. I certainly don’t want to suggest that I always get it right with my own writing, and (although people seem to have a different impression) I find writing hard. My solution to this, such as it is, is to build writing up slowly, in small manageable pieces, a little-by-little approach that can develop over time into something. And I suppose, when pressed, this is the advice I do give people, especially my students: do not defer writing to some point in the future, and write regularly. I admire people who seem to be able to turn on the “writing switch,” and produce large quantities of material in intense bursts of creativity. But that rarely works for me, and so I’ve worked out a different approach. It’s not like pushing pebbles off a cliff, but slowly rolling them up one, to form a small but growing pile; where frequently pebbles will be removed, polished, and rearranged, and sometimes replaced or discarded. Over time the pebbles become something, or the pile gets raided for a different pile.
Writing regularly does not mean everyday, although for me that would be the ideal situation. Writing regularly is about planning your time so that writing is there as an important aspect. I am sure that for many, writing is the activity that most regularly gets squeezed out in busy and hectic schedules. Perhaps only background or speculative reading is more commonly dropped to make time for other things. But given the importance of writing for academic careers, it is unfortunate that it gets dropped, deferred, neglected. When at my busiest—as director of graduate studies in the first year of editing *Society and Space*—I still tried to keep writing part of my regular schedule. It was the first time someone else had the ability to put meetings into my diary without my direct approval. In order to keep writing going, I would put a few times—perhaps two hours long—as appointments with myself into the diary. I would tell the people who had access to my diary that they could move them, but they could not delete them. So they could be at different times of the day or week to accommodate other things, but they were supposed not to disappear. It was difficult to maintain this, but the idea of building time into your schedule for research-based activity seemed the only way to avoid it being dropped entirely.

I firmly believe the way to write is to make time to write, and to protect it. Ideally, yes, I have completely uninterrupted time to write, and I like to block out complete days, but those can be a scarce commodity. The days are very hard to come by when teaching, and even when on research leave or fellowship other tasks such as reading PhD students’ work, other projects, editing a journal, referee tasks, meetings, correspondence, etc. can intrude. My perfect writing day would be to split the day into two parts—a long uninterrupted session in the morning, followed by a long bike ride to clear the head and let ideas come, followed by another session later in the day. But such days can rarely be achieved. So, for me, the way to ensure that the writing does not continually get deferred until that “clear day” is to make time for it.

Collapsing the Research/Writing Distinction

Writing for me is not something separate from, and subsequent to, research. I don't do “research” and then write “it” up. Rather it's a continually intertwined process. I type up my notes, even if I've first taken them on paper. Having quotations and thoughts from reading in Word files, or now, increasingly, in Evernote, means that I can access the material easily. Keeping all my active research files and writing projects in Dropbox has really helped now that I am visiting other universities increasingly often because of my role at Warwick. I'm never in a work setting without at least one device I can access these files on.

So I write about my reading, commentary on and around quotations, and in this way often texts begin to emerge. In all my different projects I work mainly with texts (primary texts, secondary literature, interviews, documents, news reports etc.), so the note taking is an integral part of the writing. This helps generate things I might use. I write to make sense of what I’m writing, what I’m thinking, what I’m reading. I rarely begin writing at the beginning of a section or chapter, but often write out from some middle point. Sections begin to develop, and things get reordered. Texts emerge—I rarely sit down and begin writing “a paper” from scratch. I write, trying to remember that the sentence I am writing will not be the one that will appear on the printed published page. Nothing I write is final, which for me helps to break the block that can come with trying to get a word, phrase, sentence or paragraph “right”. I try to get the gist of what I am thinking, saying, arguing down, and go back over it again and again. I edit, rewrite, edit and repeat the process. Sentences and paragraphs get broken in half, things get reordered, cut out, or written again. If I get stuck, I tend to write what I call my “stage directions” into the text, usually enclosed in square brackets and sometimes highlighted: “this bit doesn’t work”; “revise this”; “add references to X”; “what’s the point here?”; “does this make
I make radical changes to a text, and then decide someway down the line that a previous version worked better, then I can still find the relevant passage. “Undo” can be useful of course, but you can’t undo selective actions instead of the whole after that point, and undo doesn’t work once you have closed and reopened a file. Anything cut goes into a special file of “discards,” which can be returned to at later stages—some things that needed to be cut can still prove useful at a later point. I sometimes turn “track changes” on, and then make it invisible on the screen. That way I can survey what I’ve done at the end of the day and return to previous formulations. I don’t like seeing the changes appear, but having a chance to check back is helpful. You can do this other ways of course, but this one works for me, usually on late drafts.

If I have a time set aside for writing and the creative spark just isn’t there, then I try to use the time for something connected to the work. Finding library shelfmarks, ordering books from the library store or on inter-library loan, downloading relevant articles, checking author-guidelines, and so on. Or I print the last draft and read it over for grammar, maybe seeing a link or sparking an idea. I tend to do the notes as I go, but tidying up references can also be done in less creative time. Anything that moves the writing forward is, I think, a productive use of the time. Incremental movement is still movement towards a goal. I try not to fall into the habit of just using that time for reading though, because sometimes reading, while essential, can be a deferral strategy: “if I can just get through this pile of reading, this book, those articles, then I will be ready to write.” But the reading is, thankfully, something that will never be finished. Given that I don’t really make a distinction between “writing” and “research,” this can sometimes be blurred, but I try not to delay writing too long. Even initial sketchy thoughts on the basis of reading, followed by more reading, and more writing, can move things forward.
I’ve also run a blog for the last five and a bit years—www.progressivegeographies.com. The blog has gained a respectable readership, in large part because I link to lots of things that I find interesting, and so I’m aware people are reading it as a kind of research hub. Few people can possibly be interested in all the things I’m interested in, but more people seem to have an interest in some of them than would be following the blog if it was just about my research. But when I do say something about my research, there is a large audience out there who become exposed to it. Unlike other people, I’ve tended not to post sections of draft material to the blog, in the hope of comments. I admire people who do, especially for their ability to share very tentative initial thoughts. But for me what I’ve found useful is to blog about my work, rather than blog my work. This began when I was working on my book *The Birth of Territory*, where I would share things I was discovering, or stories of problems with tracking down ever more arcane references, or talk about the process of building an argument, structuring chapters and revising the manuscript. I found this process helpful, partly because it gave me an opportunity to discuss the work I was doing, and to reassure myself that I had been doing something productive, even if several days’ work only appeared as a trace in the manuscript, perhaps in an endnote. I’ve been doing something similar with the writing of my current books on Foucault, with semi-regular updates on what I’ve been doing.

In my writing, I quite often build up “tools” to help with the process. So, with the *Foucault’s Last Decade* book one of the first tasks was using Daniel Defert’s “Chronology” from *Dits et écrits* as the basis for a timeline in that period. I then worked through the lecture courses, *Dits et écrits* itself, the biographies and other textual information to add lots of details. This preparatory work was then helpful for me in seeing the proximity of things that might otherwise appear disconnected. This then became a constant reference as I was working on the material, often being amended or supplemented by new information. In doing this I was able to identify some discrepancies in published material, or make connections that would have been otherwise unnoticed by me. With some other things, I made line-by-line comparisons between variant forms of a text, which served a quite specific purpose for me, but which perhaps would only figure in the finished manuscript as a minute trace. Often I shared those on my blog—I benefited from some others doing similar work in the past, so thought it might be helpful to others to make mine available. The development of these kinds of tools—mini-concordances, bibliographies, variant texts, etc.—might be seen as separate from writing, but for me this kind of mechanical work is again part of the overall process because it is moving the writing forward.

Usually I write best in the morning, so I try to limit the distraction of email at that time, and avoid having the schedule for my day set by others. Email, editing, admin, teaching preparation etc. are things that can come later. I find I can tolerate the less appealing aspects of my work much better if I’ve had a daily fix of writing, or moving writing projects forward. So, if I can—in the summer, say, or when on research leave—I try to set at least a couple of hours aside with no distractions. To help with writing, I try to organize other aspects of my work life the best I can. Good email management, note software, a good RSS feed reader and so on all make a difference. Because I no longer trust myself to be undistracted, I have taken email off my main computer in my home study. I have that on my laptop, phone and iPad, but when I switch to one of them it’s clear I’m no longer writing. I’ve also blocked Facebook and Twitter from that computer, and when working on just a laptop, use the “WasteNoTime” plug-in to block those sites and others for a set period of time or limit the time I can spend on them per day. I can always switch to the phone or the tablet, but again it’s clear I’m no longer writing.
Presenting Writing

As much as possible I use conference papers or invited lectures as opportunities to move the writing tasks forward. This means that I quite often decline things that will pull me in a different direction, or give “yes, but…” replies. For several years I would accept invitations primarily if they allowed me to speak about some aspect of the history of territory project. Now I’m much more likely to take the time to prepare a talk, travel and spend time at a place if it allows me to talk about Foucault or Shakespeare, because that is where my current projects and interests are.

There are times when a conference paper or an invited seminar is just that event. But as much as I am able I try to use it as a chance to try out ideas with an audience, and to have the non-negotiable deadline of a talk as goal to aim for with the writing. What this means is that I generally write a talk, even if I later turn it into a presentation. I don’t like reading every word of a talk, but there is generally a largely written version behind the scenes. When I have a written text, then I might turn it into a PowerPoint presentation. So the presentation comes from the text, rather than the other way round. I’m well aware lots of people do the reverse, and that it works for them. But I equally think there are lots of people with conference papers that never got elaborated, or PowerPoints that don’t make sense when they revisit them months later. Planning it directly as a presentation often means it ends up as nothing more than that. PowerPoints, for me, began with a text, which I turn into a presentation—first the quotes, then some relevant images, and then the “structure” slides. I then take the written text and edit it to work as notes for the presentation, which I practice aloud a few times, breaking up the longer sentences and paragraphs; putting in marginal notes for which passages to “skip,” “summarize,” or “explain” more fully; and put in the cues for the slides. For me the advantage of this is that I have a fairly good text immediately after the presentation.

Conclusion

For me the goal is not counting words. But think of it this way. Take a 52-week year. Take four weeks holiday. Take three days per week with time set aside for writing. That’s 144 writing days. Write 500 words a day—about a page of a printed text. That’s 72,000 words, which could be seen as roughly two articles and half a book. A couple of articles a year and a book every two or three isn’t exactly Sartre-level words per day madness—it’s an achievable amount of work. With a relatively small number of writing days a week it quickly adds up to a substantial amount. The 500 words target is good, finished, polished, and properly footnoted text. For me the way to do this is to try to write regularly, to protect writing time, to have the tools and mechanics right and to free myself from the pressure of thinking any sentence I write is the final version. As I said, I generally write, edit, rewrite, etc. multiple times, so that different parts of the writing will be at different stages.

I’ve written about “writing” quite a few times on the Progressive Geographies blog (and raided some of those posts for a few sentences here), in part because I’m very interested in how different people do this. I’m not trying to convince anyone my way
should be their way, but maybe something in how I work might spark an idea that is different. Derek Gregory, for example, works in a quite different way from me, often beginning with the idea of a presentation, a storyboard, and images, and crafting a narration to go with this, which over time becomes a written text. It clearly works for him—an excellent presenter and prolific writer. Henry Yeung and I did a session on writing strategies when I was visiting National University of Singapore, and we work in very different ways, only agreeing that we’d found a system that works for us. Graham Harman and I have discussed our very different approaches on our respective blogs. Collaborative writing—with Neil Brenner, Jeremy Crampton, Luiza Bialasiewicz, Eduardo Mendieta, Adam David Morton and others has taught me how different people work, and how to integrate different approaches. What matters is to find a way that works for you; and to be willing to experiment once in a while. I suspect most people who are now broadly happy with how they work would suggest that it is something they have arrived at over time, rather than how they have always worked. I’ve written this piece in a very different way to my normal practice, and found some aspects of that refreshing. I am sure I will learn other approaches from the other contributions to this book.