

## Introduction

*This is how you do it: you sit down at the keyboard and you put one word after another until it's done. It's that easy, and that hard.*

—Neil Gaiman

Ugh. You ain't lying, Neil. Writing is tough. As the universe would have it, here I am truly struggling with writing the introduction to this book and feeling slightly triggered by its title.<sup>1</sup> I've started and stalled out at least a dozen times. Though the irony here is thick, it's a sort of irony that I'm unfortunately somewhat used to as someone who studies the development of writing motivation and productivity and as someone who also happens to identify as a struggling writer. Writing just happens to be a complex cognitive and motivational process that makes most writers—even really good writers and super bright people with PhDs—feel as if they're struggling depending on the day, the task, their mood, or a zillion other factors. If you, like me, have ever found yourself sighing deeply and staring at the blinking cursor on your currently blank document of a draft, this book is for you. This book is also for those who have ever found themselves neck-deep in the frustration and funk of (not) writing.

The purpose of this text is to describe evidence on how smart and otherwise fairly normal people sometimes lose their minds when it comes to writing, and then show the reader how to stop being one of those people. It should be noted that this isn't a typical book about writing. From books that teach how to write to those that teach when and what to write, there are several texts on the market to help academics become better writers. This book differs in that it acknowledges and explores how emotionally and mentally challenging it can be to be a "good writer." *Why Aren't You Writing* serves as a primer for academic writers—from graduate students

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<sup>1</sup> Well played, universe. Well played.

to post-docs and professors—to understand and normalize the psychological, social, emotional, motivational, and physiological hurdles that can get in the way of writing productivity. It also provides strategies—some concrete and practical and others light-hearted—to engage beginning and struggling academic writers in building a healthier relationship with writing and ultimately to write more with less pain.

## Organization of the Book

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Successful academic writing requires not only skill but real—sometimes all too real—psychological and emotional work. After all, to become excellent and productive in our writing, we must first understand ourselves as writers—the good, the bad, and well, sometimes the quite ugly. From the inner shenanigans, such as anxiety and the imposter phenomenon, to the contextual shenanigans, such as what we write, the feedback we receive on drafts, who we write alongside, and how we work with collaborators, the chapters within this book dig into many of the stumbling blocks in the way of making progress in our academic writing. In Chapter 2, we learn how feelings of fraudulence and inadequacy—despite evidence to the contrary—can lead to writing sabotage. We will unpack our academic and writing identities as a first step toward recognizing and managing our potential cognitive distortions. Chapter 3 provides empirical evidence underlying the many shades of fear, stress, and anxiety that can plague our writing. We'll learn how paralyzing feelings of being overwhelmed can seize up any hopes we have of making progress and how to recognize when we might be under attack by our own brains. We'll also learn strategies for finding healthy engagement and flow in our writing. In Chapter 4, we explore the magical power you possess when you believe that you are a capable writer. You'll also find strategies to gain more of that magic for your own writing. Chapter 5 shows how maladaptive perfectionism can lead us to strive for unattainable writing ideals and can ultimately lead to destructive thoughts and behaviors, but research illustrates constructive ways for us to approach our writing and ourselves as writers. You'll find techniques to conquer your inner perfectionist dragon. Chapter 6 describes how we are much happier and productive writers when we have a bit of control over or interest in what, how, and when we write and work. We will delve into tricks for getting interested in our academic writing when we're not actually all that interested as well as effective strategies for finding autonomy in this bossy world. In Chapter 7, we learn about the reasons why we might block feedback on our writing. After all,

feedback is effective only if we are open to receiving it. We will explore strategies for guiding others on how to give us meaningful feedback and find ways to be more open-minded about the feedback we receive about our writing. Chapter 8 discusses how writing can be a lonely endeavor and the ways in which loneliness can compromise our health and productivity. We will uncover some of the reasons why you might feel isolated in your writing and discuss strategies to help you build your writing village. Chapter 9 shows how practicing self-compassion and self-care are the secret weapons to (more) peaceful progress in your writing. We wrap up the book in an un-ending of sorts in the afterword.

## Organization of Each Chapter

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Each chapter begins with a discussion of evidence from research related to the many shenanigans we might experience as academic writers. Across this literature, a few themes will be evident throughout the book. First, research on academic writers is not limited to discipline or place. The samples in the studies included throughout come from psychology, education, medical fields, law, and others from all over the world. Next, because inner and contextual shenanigans are complex and often interlinked so too is the literature. As such, some ideas and strategies will appear in multiple chapters. Finally, from literature across psychology, sociology, and higher education, the research included in this book makes it quite clear that there is no quick fix to make writing easy and painless every time. Difficult and complex challenges such as writing and publishing in academia are not solved easily. For each chapter, the main points to glean from the literature are summarized in the TL;DR (too long; didn't read) section.

To help you move beyond the writing challenges holding you back, each chapter also provides practical strategies and resources for managing the shenanigans in your writing world. Such an undertaking can be a painful journey. It can be tough to think about difficult and personal topics. This book balances the hard work required for change with a bit of levity often necessary for withstanding sustained thinking and changing. It's probably here where I should mention that this isn't a typical textbook because, well, typical textbooks are borrrrrring.<sup>2</sup> Throughout this book, you'll notice that like a river,

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<sup>2</sup> \*Half-heartedly apologizes to editor and publisher\*

my ridiculousness runs wide and it runs deep.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the potential overuse of made-up words and bizarre examples, I've included actual shenanigans in the form of mildly absurd quizzes and additional activities in each chapter to provide you with a bit of comic relief oft-needed in times of writer duress-distress. You'll also find more footnotes than you perhaps expected. It turns out that I really really like footnotes.<sup>4</sup>

## How to Use This Book

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Use this book in the way it works for you, whether it's by opening it up and dropping into a chapter that sounds particularly relevant, or reading it straight through, or reflecting on a section of the research, or trying one strategy at a time. The chapters and strategies do not necessarily build upon each other so feel free to skip around, but commit to practicing at least one to two strategies to get the most benefit from each chapter. You might find it particularly helpful to read this book with others either as part of a course or study group, as discussions help normalize angsty feels and it can be helpful to hear how others manage those feels.

## A Couple of Notes Before You Begin

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Before you dig into this book, there's one word that I want you to think about and keep in mind as you read: *grace*. By grace, I mean taking off that ill-fitting critic's hat for both you and your writing. By grace, I mean meeting yourself where you actually are as a writer and academic—*without judgment*—and making space for yourself to grow. Spinny feelings and emotions often arise when we take a deep look at ourselves and the things that are important to us. However, there's room for all of your feels and grace to coexist—if you make room for them. Both you and your writing need and deserve grace so I challenge you to scooch on over and make some room.

Also, it's important to note that I've learned (and relearned, and then, sometimes relearned again) the lessons and strategies throughout this book. The truth is, being a peaceful and productive writer is a lot like sweeping

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<sup>3</sup> Turns out I'm weird. Fa la la.

<sup>4</sup> Second only to my affinity for strange metaphors. My apologies in advance for freely mixing several throughout.

the floor. You don't just sweep it once and think to yourself, "Grand, now I'll never have to sweep it again. My work here is done." Humans and animals run in and around tracking mud and whatnot, our attempts at cooking leave their mark, etc. etc. Mind work is rather similar, unfortunately. Don't be discouraged if you find yourself in the funk of writing and needing to reread chapters of this book. Take heart, sweep the floor, and get back in your writing chair.

Finally, don't be discouraged or feel different if you find that your personal struggles with writing are not covered in this book. In no way do these chapters cover all of the ways that academic writing can get us down. I'd love to hear your suggestions and recommendations on what could be added to the book. Please feel free to reach out by email at [szumbrunn@gmail.com](mailto:szumbrunn@gmail.com).

### Activity: Put Your Grace Goggles On!

Within the grace goggles lenses below, write one statement that will help you remember the grace you need and deserve on your journey to becoming a more peaceful academic writer. Skip to the perforated pages at the end of the book to cut out the grace goggles and keep them in sight while you write.

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