



## 'Write every day!': a mantra dismantled

Helen Sword

To cite this article: Helen Sword (2016) 'Write every day!': a mantra dismantled, International Journal for Academic Development, 21:4, 312-322, DOI: [10.1080/1360144X.2016.1210153](https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2016.1210153)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2016.1210153>



Published online: 11 Aug 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1993



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

## 'Write every day!': a mantra dismantled

Helen Sword

Faculty of Education, Centre for Learning and Research in Higher Education, University of Auckland, New Zealand

### ABSTRACT

Numerous books, blogs, and articles on research productivity exhort academics to 'write every day' even during the busiest of teaching times. Ironically, however, this research-boosting advice hangs from a perilously thin research thread. This article scrutinises the key findings of Robert Boice, whose pioneering studies of 'professors as writers' in the 1980s and 1990s are still widely cited today, and offers new empirical evidence to suggest that the writing practices of successful academics are in fact far more varied and individualistic than has generally been acknowledged in the literature.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 July 2015  
Accepted 15 June 2016

### KEYWORDS

Academic writing;  
scholarly writing; research  
productivity; Robert Boice

The admonition 'Write every day!' echoes like a mantra through recent books, manuals, and online resources on academic development and research productivity (e.g. Belcher, 2009, pp. 5–6; Bolker, 1998, p. xviii; Germano, 2005, p. 128; Goodson, 2013, p. 21; Gray, 2010, p. 11; Johnson & Mullen, 2007, pp. 10–12; Murray, 2005, pp. 154–55; Silvia, 2007, pp. 12–13). Ironically, however, this research-boosting advice is seldom backed up by the independent research of those who advocate it. Instead, proponents of the 'write every day' credo tend to base their recommendations mostly on anecdotal sources such as their own personal practice, the experiences of their students and colleagues, and the autobiographical accounts of full-time professional authors such as Stephen King, Annie Lamott, Maya Angelou, and bell hooks (see King, 2000, p. 148; Lamott, 1994, pp. xxii, 232; Charney, 2013; hooks, 1999, p. 15). Those who do seek to bolster their advice with research evidence almost inevitably cite the published findings of behavioural psychologist Robert Boice, whose famous intervention studies with 'blocked' writers took place more than two decades ago, were limited in demographic scope, and have never been replicated. Boice himself laced his empirical studies with the language of religious faith, referring to his write-every-day crusade as 'missionary work' and encouraging those who benefitted from his teachings to go forth and recruit new 'disciples' (Boice, 1990, p. 128). Remove Boice from the equation, and the existing literature on scholarly writing offers little or no conclusive evidence that academics who write every day are any more prolific, productive, or otherwise successful than those who do not.

In this article, I call into question the Boicean premise – often preached, seldom challenged – that daily scheduled writing is the one true path to scholarly salvation. Based on an international study of 1323 academic staff, PhD students and post-doctoral researchers

in fifteen countries, I offer evidence that the vast majority of successful academics do not in fact write every day; that the correlation between daily writing and high productivity is a tenuous one at best; and that academics who explicitly reject the ‘write every day’ formula can still be prolific writers. This is not to suggest that daily writing is a bad idea (quite the contrary) or that Boice’s strategies for increasing productivity are ineffectual or unwise (indeed, I practice many of them myself – dare I say ‘religiously’?) However, my research underlines the importance, particularly for academic developers, of treating with caution any prescriptive, one-size-fits-all advice that demands unquestioning obedience from its followers and imposes guilt and blame on those who stray.

### **A convert’s tale**

Ten years ago, I read an article that changed the way I write. In ‘Procrastination, busyness, and bingeing’ (1989), Boice describes an intervention study in which he worked closely for one year with three groups of previously unproductive early-career academics. Participants in the first group continued to behave as they always had, typically ‘saving up’ their research writing for large blocks of uninterrupted time that seldom actually happened. Those in the second group agreed to write every day in brief, daily sessions (30 minutes on average) and to log their writing time. Those in the third group did the same, with the variation that Boice visited them twice weekly at unannounced intervals ‘to prod them to continue writing, to see their charts of writing productivity, and to persist in therapeutic strategies that facilitate writing’ (Boice, 1989, p. 609). The results of the study were astounding: by the end of the year, the participants in the third group had produced, on average, more than twice as many pages as those in the second group and more than nine times as many as those in the control group.

Impressed by Boice’s findings, I immediately resolved to start following a writing regimen similar to that of the most productive academics in his study. I booked daily writing time into my scheduler, recorded every minute that I spent engaged in research writing, and recruited a colleague to meet with me once a week to exchange time logs and discuss our respective goals and progress. The first part of this experiment was a resounding success; by starting my weekday mornings with a cup of tea and an hour of scholarly writing, I found that I could often lay down a new paragraph before breakfast. The second part also proved beneficial; after several months of logging my writing time and tracking my word count, I gradually became more realistic about planning my workload, more disciplined about carving out dedicated writing and editing time, and more confident about achieving my goals.

The third part of my Boicean experiment, however, did not pan out so well. My ‘writing buddy’ stuck to his agreed writing routine only for a short time; after that, our weekly meetings quickly disintegrated into a morass of apologies and excuses, until we gave them up altogether. Over the next few years I tried several times to resurrect the arrangement with other writing partners, but with no luck. Boice insists that keeping a daily writing log is critical to mastering a productive writing routine: ‘Sometimes the chart alone, especially the guilt of posting up a wasted day, is stimulus enough to get people writing’ (Boice, 1990, p. 31). But that guilt wasn’t stimulus enough for my colleagues, apparently. One after another agreed to a weekly exchange of writing logs and supportive conversation; but one after another, despite my enthusiasm and encouragement, they soon fell by the wayside. Remorse and self-flagellation invariably followed: ‘I know I’m supposed to schedule daily

writing time like you do, but I just don't seem to be able to keep it up. You're much more disciplined than I am. I'm sorry I've let you down.

In retrospect, I should have taken my colleagues' failings as a warning signal. Instead, relying on my own positive experience rather than their negative ones, I became an eager evangelist for the Boicean cause. With a convert's zeal, I recited to anyone who would listen the many compelling reasons why daily writing works:

- Daily writing prevents writer's block.
- Daily writing demystifies the writing process.
- Daily writing keeps your research always at the top of your mind.
- Daily writing generates new ideas.
- Daily writing stimulates creativity
- Daily writing adds up incrementally.
- Daily writing helps you figure out what you want to say.

Boice's copious research publications – between 1981 and 2001 he published four books, more than 20 single-authored journal articles, and numerous book chapters, commentaries and co-authored articles on the topic of academic productivity – supplied plenty of hard data to back up these recommendations. In one study, Boice demonstrated that 'binge writers' who waited for inspiration produced only about one-sixth as many pages as (and had far fewer 'creative and useful' ideas than) academics who followed a regular writing schedule (Boice, 1997, pp. 449–450). In another, he showed that academics who devoted time every week to writing exhibited significantly higher productivity levels than their peers, as measured by page counts and publication rates (Boice & Johnson, 1984).

In one of his most widely cited experiments, Boice put 27 faculty members into three groups. Those in the first group were asked to abstain from writing for ten weeks but to keep a log of creative ideas related to their research; those in the second group scheduled daily writing time but wrote only when they were 'in the mood'; and those in the third group followed a strict accountability plan that involved writing for five scheduled sessions every week and writing out several 15-dollar cheques that would be mailed to a hated organisation if they failed to stick to the schedule on any given day. At the end of the study period, Boice found that academics in the 'contingency management' group – those who wrote every day under threat of punishment – had produced more than three times the written output of those in the spontaneous group and 16 times more than those in the abstinence group: an impressive 3.2 pages per day. In addition, Boice reported, the contingency management group recorded a significantly higher number of 'creative ideas' during that period than the other two groups (Boice, 1983; summarised in Boice 1990, pp. 82–84).

To colleagues who still resisted changing their ways even after hearing about Boice's remarkable research findings – 'But I can only write when I feel like writing' or 'I can't write in the early mornings because I'm too busy looking after my small children' or 'I don't like the idea of scheduling every moment of my waking life' – I recommended Paul Silvia's book *How to write a lot*, a succinct, witty guide to academic productivity in the Boicean mode. Silvia insists that productivity has nothing to do with pleasure:

Some kinds of writing are so unpleasant that no normal person will ever feel like doing them. ... Struggling writers who 'wait for inspiration' should get off their high horse and join the unwashed masses of real academic writers. (Silvia, 2007, pp. 24–26)

'I'm too busy,' he says, is just a 'specious excuse' for avoiding daily writing:

Like most false beliefs, this barrier persists because it's comforting. It's reassuring to believe that circumstances are against you and that you would write a lot if only your schedule had a few more big chunks of time to devote to writing. (Silvia, 2007, p. 12)

So is an aversion to scheduling:

Binge writers spend more time feeling guilty and anxious about not writing than schedule followers spend writing ... When confronted with their fruitless ways, binge writers often proffer a self-defeating dispositional attribution: 'I'm just not the kind of person who's good at making a schedule and sticking to it.' This is nonsense, of course. People like dispositional explanations when they don't want to change. (Silvia, 2007, p. 14)

Silvia's no-nonsense, pull-your-socks-up advice clearly resonated with many of my colleagues; they headed back to their offices with eyes bright and shoulders squared, determined to give daily writing a go. But how many of those enthusiastic converts, I wonder now, were still writing every day a year, a month, or even a week later? And how many others slunk away from my workshops in brow-beaten silence, feeling even more 'guilty and anxious' than before?

### **The seeds of apostasy**

In 2011, I embarked on a research project that eventually took me to 45 universities on four continents (see Appendix 1). Over a four-year period, I conducted on-the-record interviews with 100 successful academic researchers from across the disciplines, most of whom had been identified by me or recommended by their peers as 'exemplary writers' according to a broad set of criteria. I also gathered anonymous questionnaire data from 1223 academic staff, post-doctoral researchers, PhD students and university-based professional writers, most of whom were voluntary participants in writing development workshops that I offered at their institutions or at discipline-based conferences. Participants in both groups – the peer-nominated 'successful writers' as well as the self-selected workshop participants – were asked to respond to three common questions or prompts:

- (1) Background: Briefly describe your professional formation as a writer. How and from whom did you learn to write in your discipline? Have you undertaken any formal learning (e.g. books, workshops, courses on academic writing), either pre- or post-PhD?
- (2) Work habits: Briefly describe your academic writing habits. Where, when and how often do you write?
- (3) Emotions: Briefly describe the main emotions that you associate with your academic writing.

At first, I rather naively assumed that my findings would affirm Boice's core principles. The 'exemplary' academics I interviewed would tell me, mostly, that they write every day; the academics who enrolled in my workshops in search of writing advice would tell me, mostly, that they do not; and I would be able to present empirical evidence that daily scheduled writing is indeed the magic bullet that Boice claims it to be, the secret elixir that ensures academic success. As the interview transcripts and data questionnaires began to pile up, however, they yielded some unexpected results. To my surprise, only a small percentage of respondents in both groups – 12.8% of the hand-picked interview subjects and 11.5% of

the ‘unwashed masses’ – reported that they write, or at least aspire to write, every weekday throughout the academic year. Put another way, roughly seven out of eight academics surveyed do *not* write every day; daily writing turns out to be neither a reliable marker nor a clear predictor of overall academic success.

This startling statistic sent me back to take a closer look at Boice’s publications and subsequent reception history. What I found shook my faith not only in the ‘write every day’ mantra but in the methodological robustness of the productivity literature more generally. Rereading from the perspective of a skeptic rather than a grateful disciple, I began to notice how often Boice’s findings have been exaggerated, over-simplified, or unquestioningly recycled by academics eager to justify their own methods and beliefs, a phenomenon described by psychologists as ‘confirmation bias’ (Nickerson, 1998; Wason, 1960). For example, the 1989 article on ‘Procrastination, busyness, and bingeing’ that first inspired my conversion to daily writing is summarised as follows by Tara Gray:

In one of [Boice’s] studies, a group of scholars wrote the way they had always written – occasionally, in big blocks of time. The group wrote or revised a mean of 17 pages per year. Another group wrote daily, kept records of their time spent writing, and held themselves accountable to others for writing daily. This group wrote or revised a mean of 157 pages per year or nine times as many pages. (Gray, 2010, p. 3)

The statistics cited by Gray appear nowhere in the original article, except obliquely in a rather hard-to-interpret diagram (Boice, 1989; p. 609). The ‘157 pages’ produced by participants in the accountability group were rough drafts, presumably handwritten or typed on a typewriter or very basic word processor. (This was the 1980s, after all). And the ‘others’ to whom the group held themselves accountable in fact consisted of just one person – Boice himself. In the article he explains that, having identified 14 chronic procrastinators in an earlier study of 108 new faculty at his own university, he subsequently recruited ten of them to undergo a concentrated intervention that included ‘a regimen of brief daily writing sessions and a series of follow-up visits with feedback to ensure the perpetuation of these regimens’ (Boice, 1989, p. 608). These ten hand-picked subjects did not merely ‘hold themselves accountable’ to Boice, as Gray puts it; they were intensively mentored and monitored by him at least twice a week.

In a similar vein, Silvia sums up Boice’s 1983 contingency management study – the one in which participants who failed to write every day were ‘punished’ by being forced to contribute money to a hated organisation – as follows:

First, people in the contingency management condition wrote a lot: They wrote 3.5 times as many pages as people in the spontaneous condition and 16 times as much as those in the abstinence condition. People who wrote ‘when they felt like it’ were barely more productive than people told not to write at all – inspiration is overrated. Second, forcing people to write enhanced their creative ideas for writing. The typical number of days between creative ideas was merely 1 day for people who were forced to write; it was 2 days for people in the spontaneous condition and 5 days for people in the abstinence condition. Writing breeds good ideas for writing. (Silvia, 2007, p. 24)

Only upon turning to the original article do we discover that Boice’s cohort was, once again, very small (nine subjects in each of three groups), geographically limited (the participants all came from local campuses in Albany, New York), and composed entirely of self-identified procrastinators whose daily reported outputs (averaging .2 pages for the control group, .8 for the spontaneous group, and 3.2 for the contingency management group) may well have been

longhand drafts rather than typed manuscript pages (Boice, 1983, p. 538). The conditions of the study, moreover, were highly contrived, especially for members of the control group, who were instructed to abstain from all ‘non-essential’ academic writing for ten weeks. (No wonder their reported outputs were so miniscule.) Boice notes in passing that his original group of volunteers was much larger than the final cohort:

15 [subjects] dropped out of this program before providing useful amounts of data (i.e. about 6 weeks of continuous participation): 3 dropped out of the contingency group, two out of the noncontingent/sustained group and 10 out of the control group. All dropouts but one cited the nuisance of charting and listing on a regular basis as their primary reason. (Boice, 1983, p. 540)

The high drop-out rate – 15 of the original 42 participants, leaving just 27 who completed the study – suggests that Boice’s research methods did not sit well with many of the academics on whom they were imposed. However, Boice makes no mention of this or other methodological caveats when he sums up the study in his 1990 book *Professors as writers*, where he merely states, ‘I gathered 27 faculty members from universities as volunteer research subjects’ (Boice, 1990, p. 82).

What, then, do Boice’s two articles really tell us about the relationship between daily scheduled writing and research productivity? The 1989 procrastination study shows that, when ten hand-picked junior faculty members are monitored and mentored twice a week by an energetic colleague at their own university, they are likely to become unusually productive during that period of intensive individual support. Likewise, the 1983 ‘contingency management’ study demonstrates that when nine self-identified procrastinators are threatened with a risk of punishment – the forced donation of their own money to a hated organisation – they are capable of increasing their daily written outputs throughout a ten-week period of sustained invigilation. (Krashen (2002) calls into question, however, Boice’s claim that the data in this study show an increased level of creative thinking.) In neither case does Boice supply longitudinal data to suggest that the high levels of productivity continued beyond the intervention. Indeed, in *Professors as writers* he admits that graduates of his private clinical ‘unblocking’ practice, having undergone a strict regime of daily scheduled writing and contingency management backed up by cognitive therapy and social support, often fell back into their bad habits soon after his one-on-one sessions with them stopped. Only through further intensive coaching, Boice explains, was he able to reverse their ‘backsliding’ – a term he explicitly associates with straying ‘from the strict rules of religion’ – and win them ‘back to the congregation of satisfied and productive writers’ (Boice, 1990, pp. 121, 124).

Boice pioneered the field of higher education productivity research, and many subsequent scholars have benefitted from his passionate commitment to helping academics become more confident and prolific writers. As the foregoing examples show, however, his research findings reflect several assumptions that have not been adequately interrogated or challenged by academic developers or others who enthusiastically cite his publications and advocate his methods. First, Boice’s self-help strategies are based on a deficit model of productivity; with few exceptions (e.g. Boice, 1991), nearly all of his major studies focus on overturning negative behaviours such as procrastination and blocking, even though, by his own estimation, only around 12 percent of academic researchers actually suffer from writer’s block (Boice & Johnson, 1984, p. 38). Second, Boice’s one-size-fits-all formula takes no account of the ways in which factors such as national and cultural background, preferred learning style, academic rank, scholarly discipline, or gender might predispose different types of writers to respond differently

to different methods. (European academics have told me that they find Boice's puritanical approach 'very American'; a female colleague dismisses his productivity-pumping vigour as 'intellectual machismo'.) Third and perhaps most crucially, Boice's methods rely on the premise that academics who have adopted a highly structured writing regime will stick to that regime once the intervention has finished – whereas in fact, as any drill sergeant or Mother Superior can attest, few human beings from any segment of society possess the intrinsic self-discipline required to adhere to such a regimented routine on their own day after day, however beneficial its effects. The vocabulary of academic development hints at this all-too-common human failing: many universities now offer writing support services based on disciplinary models from the worlds of sports, religion and the military, such as 'writing coaching', 'writing cloisters' and even 'dissertation boot camps'.

### Scholarly writing in the real world

In the Boicean universe, satisfied and productive writers all behave more or less the same way. They write every day; they schedule their writing time; they sequester themselves while writing; they write in small, manageable chunks; they separate writing tasks from editing tasks; they set daily and weekly writing goals; they track their hours and count their words. In the real world of scholarly writing, on the other hand, successful academics carve out time and space for writing in an impressive variety of ways. Some of the colleagues I interviewed write before breakfast:

I wake up in the morning and I start working right away. I sit with my computer on my lap and I drink my coffee and I write. That's when I'm at my smartest. I think it's the coffee. (Marjorie Fee, Professor of English, University of British Columbia, Canada)

Others prefer afternoons:

I'm not very good first thing in the morning, so I like to do not-so-challenging things then. But between three and seven p.m., between afternoon tea and dinner, that's when the best writing comes. (Alison Gopnik, Professor of Psychology, University of California at Berkeley)

Or evenings after dinner:

I write in the evenings, and it keeps my sanity. After these days of meetings and dealings with budgets and this boring stuff, there is a total switching of gears. Some other people may play the violin instead. People escape in different ways. (Sun Kwok, Professor of Physics and Dean of Science, University of Hong Kong)

Or even the middle of the night:

I got used to writing late at night when my son was small. He would go to bed around ten, and then I got into the habit of staying up until two or three and writing at night. As he grew up, in fact, he would sometimes wake up like at one in the morning and say, 'Mommy, are you writing?' 'Yes'. It was very comforting to him to know that I was still awake. (Ruth Behar, Professor of Anthropology, University of Michigan)

Some turn off email:

When I was on research leave in California, because of the time difference, I would wake up and find my inbox already full of messages from colleagues on the East Coast. But then when I went on research leave to France, there was no new email in the mornings, so my time there was much more productive. That's when I learned the importance of 'unplugging' when I'm writing. (Leah Price, Professor of English, Harvard University)



**Others turn on email:**

I just let the emails come in and I'm curious – I look at them every time I hear the little ring. It's an addiction, but it doesn't seem to interrupt my thoughts. I can just stop for five minutes, reply to an email, and get back to the writing. A brief interruption will not make me forget what I've been thinking about for days. (Robert Poulin, Professor of Zoology, University of Otago, New Zealand)

**Some write only at work:**

I don't and can't write at home. It's just impossible. My family would just never let it happen. My son will say things to me like, 'I hate your computer,' which is devastating coming from a two-year-old. (Stephen Ross, Professor of English, University of Victoria, Canada)

**Or anywhere but work:**

I've hardly ever written anything good here in my office. It always happens in the middle of the night or in the morning in a summer cottage, or at strange places like the train. So I tell my students, 'You should go to the forest or down to the beach to write.' (Thomas Aastrup Rømer, Associate Professor of Education, Aarhus University, Denmark)

**Or only at home:**

I have a lovely office on campus, but I basically can't work there because it's too distracting. People come by, and it is very nice that they come by – my colleagues and graduate students and that sort of thing. Most of my writing gets done on my laptop on the dining room table in New York or the sitting room table in Princeton with trips to make coffee. (Kwame Anthony Appiah, Professor of Philosophy, Princeton University)

**Or in beautiful faraway places:**

The year I was translating *Eugene Onegin*, I traveled a lot. For instance, I did some stanzas up in the Sierras in California while hiking. One in a meadow. I was sitting in a tree, on a low branch in the tree, by a lake with wildflowers. I did a bunch in Paris. I also did a bunch in Italy — Florence, Siena, Trento, and other magnificent spots. (Douglas Hofstadter, Professor of cognitive science, Indiana University)

**Or in venues close to home that remind them of beautiful faraway places:**

We can't go to Paris every time we want to write productively (Paris being the site of our most productive writing/thinking sessions), but we've been trying to recreate what works for us on those trips: combining short collaborative writing bursts with reading/brainstorming sessions and physically moving to different writing locations rather than our offices. (Lisa Surridge and Mary Elizabeth Leighton, Professor and Associate Professor of English, University of Victoria, Canada)

**Or wherever or whenever they can:**

I'll write on the couch. I'll write while the TV is on. I'll write while I'm at the table. I actually get itchy if I can't write. (Inger Mewburn, Director of Research Training, Australian National University)

In fact, of the 100 academics I interviewed, only two described writing routines that closely resemble Boice's recommended regime of scheduling daily sequestered writing time. Far more frequently, the academics I spoke to explicitly rejected the strategies that Boice advocates. Write for a short period every day?

I find it almost impossible to peck at my writing. I need a week off or a month off to do it, and do nothing else. I need hours, days, weeks of uninterrupted time. (Alison Jones, Professor of Education, University of Auckland, New Zealand)

### Write only in small, manageable chunks?

That doesn't work very well for me, because of context-switching. It's a term from operating systems. If you have to do several things, in little bits, and each of these things have a lot of context – things you need to think about to do them – then you have to always change your mindset to do the next task and reacquire the full context of that task mentally. There is always a fixed cost. (Wim Vanderbauwhede, Lecturer in Computing Science, University of Glasgow.)

### Write first, edit later?

I have a very clear method when it comes to a research project, and I train all my graduate students to do it this way too. When I write a book, it takes between five and seven years, and that falls into three stages. There's a gathering stage, there's a sifting and organising stage, and there's a writing stage. By far the most time-consuming of those stages is the middle one. I lay out the book as a whole in considerable detail before I write any of it. (Kevin Kenny, Professor of History, Boston University.)

Moreover, some of the most prolific writers I interviewed defended practices that the productivity guides roundly condemn. For example, Boice warns in doom-laden tones against the evils of 'binge writing', which he defines as a tendency to spend more than 80% of one's time outside of class and meetings working on a single project (Boice, 1989, p. 608):

Avoid writing in binges. Abandon the notion that writing is best done in large, undisrupted blocks of time. Waiting for such time does more than reinforce procrastination; it demands excessive warm-up times and it encourages you to write until you are fatigued. (Boice, 1990, p. 79)

### Yet academe is full of successful binge writers:

I like writing intensively. I like picking a day when I start a project and then virtually doing nothing else until I finish, working day and night, seven days a week until it's done. That's my ideal way of writing. (Steven Pinker, Professor of Psychology, Harvard University.)

The bottom line is that Boice's austere methods do not reflect – and in some cases are antithetical to – the real-life practices of productive academics. For the vast majority of the colleagues I interviewed, writing is neither a daily routine nor a rare occurrence, neither an immovable constant nor a random event, neither a public activity nor a rigidly sequestered one; writing is the work that gets done in the interstices between teaching, office hours, faculty meetings, administration, email, family events, and all the other messy, sprawling demands of academic life. The secret to their academic success lies not in any specific element of their daily routine but in a complex cluster of attributes and attitudes that I call their 'writing BASE': behavioural habits of discipline and persistence, artisanal habits of craftsmanship and pride, social habits of collegiality and collaboration, and emotional habits of positivity and resilience (Sword, 2017; see also [www.writersdiet.com/base](http://www.writersdiet.com/base)).

These days, I still write nearly every weekday before breakfast. I still wax lyrical about the benefits of word logs, time logs, writing support groups and daily scheduled writing time, because all of these strategies have worked for me. And I still recommend the books of Boice, Silvia, Gray and others who sing from the 'write every day' hymnbook. However, in my own work as a scholar, teacher and academic developer, I have exchanged the stringent vocabulary of boot camps, coaching and cures for a more enticing set of metaphors. Instead of lecturing academics on the 'right way to write,' I offer them a menu of choices, a smorgasbord of possibilities: feasts rather than binges, nourishing diets rather than punishing purges. And alongside the puritanical prescriptions of Boice and his followers, I suggest strategies for explicitly linking productivity with craftsmanship, people, and pleasure: for

example, by reading books and attending workshops or courses that will make them feel more confident in their writing style; by forming collaborative relationships premised on emotional support rather than on disciplinary sanctions; and by seeking out writing venues filled with light and air. Above all, I urge my colleagues and students to leave behind their hair shirts of scholarly guilt when they enter the house of writing. Productivity, it turns out, is a broad church that tolerates many creeds.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the University of Auckland Faculty Research Development Fund and a University of Auckland Hood Fellowship, with research assistance provided by Louisa Shen.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Helen Sword* is Professor and Director of the Centre for Learning and Research in Higher Education at the University of Auckland. She has published widely on modernist literature, digital poetics, and higher education pedagogy and is the author of three books on academic writing: *Stylish Academic Writing* (Harvard 2012), *The Writer's Diet* (Chicago 2016) and *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write* (Harvard 2017).

## References

- Belcher, W. (2009). *Writing your journal article in 12 weeks*. New York, NY: Sage.
- Boice, R. (1983). Contingency management in writing and the appearance of creative ideas: Implications for the treatment of writing blocks. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 21, 537–543.
- Boice, R. (1989). Procrastination, busyness and bingeing. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 27, 605–611.
- Boice, R. (1990). *Professors as writers: A self-help guide to productive writing*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.
- Boice, R. (1991). Quick starters: New faculty who succeed. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 48, 111–121.
- Boice, R. (1997). Which is more productive, writing in binge patterns of creative illness or in moderation? *Written Communication*, 14, 435–459.
- Boice, R., & Johnson, K. (1984). Perception and practice of writing for publication by faculty at a doctoral-granting university. *Research in Higher Education*, 21, 33–43.
- Bolker, J. (1998). *Writing your dissertation in fifteen minutes a day: A guide to starting, revising, and finishing your doctoral thesis*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.
- Charney, N. (2013). *Maya Angelou: How I write* [Interview]. Retrieved from <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/04/10/maya-angelou-how-i-write.html>
- Germano, W. (2005). *From dissertation to book*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Goodson, P. (2013). *Becoming an academic writer: 50 exercises for paced, productive, and powerful writing*. New York, NY: Sage.
- Gray, T. (2010). *Publish and flourish: Become a prolific scholar*. New Mexico: New Mexico State University Teaching Academy.
- hooks, bell, (1999). *Remembered rapture: The writer at work*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.

- Johnson, W., & Mullen, C. (2007). *Write to the top! How to become a prolific academic*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- King, S. (2000). *On writing: A memoir of the craft*. New York, NY: Pocket Books.
- Krashen, S. (2002). Optimal levels of writing management: A re-analysis of Boice (1983). *Education*, 122(3), 605–608.
- Lamott, A. (1994). *Bird by bird*. New York, NY: Anchor.
- Murray, R. (2005). *Writing for academic journals*. Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Nickerson, R. (1998). Confirmation bias: A ubiquitous phenomenon in many guises. *Review of General Psychology*, 2, 175–220.
- Silvia, P. (2007). *How to write a lot*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Sword, H. (2017). *Air & light & time & space: How successful academics write*. Cambridge: Harvard.
- Wason, P. (1960). On the failure to eliminate hypotheses in a conceptual task. *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 12, 129–140.

## Appendix 1.

All interview quotations in this article are based on ethics-approved research undertaken at 45 universities on four continents between 2011 and 2015. During that period I conducted in-depth interviews with 100 academics, most of whom held PhDs or equivalent degrees and were employed in full-time academic positions in tertiary education, and gathered anonymous questionnaire data from 1223 faculty, research fellows, PhD students, and other academic writers in Australia, Canada, Denmark, England, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Scotland, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand and the United States. All of the interview subjects agreed to be interviewed ‘on the record’ and are quoted here by permission. For a full discussion of my research methodology and findings, see Sword (2017).