Writing Accountability Groups (WAGs)

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Writing Myths & Barriers

1. **The muse**
   a. Myth: "I need to be in the mood to write," "I need to feel inspired," "I need to feel motivated," or the corollary, "I do my best work under pressure."
   b. Debunking: Do you wait to be inspired to: see your patients, teach your classes, attend meetings, send emails? Writing is no different. There is NO writing muse. Writing is your job (it's the currency of our trade)! Do your job every day.
   c. Suggestions: (1) Write a little every day (10-30-60 mins.). Schedule it in your calendar (2) respect and honor your writing appointments - show up, start on time, come prepared, be in the moment (no distractions), and stop when your time is up (no unplanned binge-writing). What will happen? Writing will become automatic, mechanical, and less emotional – just like all your other routines and habits.

2. **There's no time**
   a. Myth: "I can't find time to write," "I have too many competing obligations," "I have too many interruptions," or the corollary, "I can't write unless I have a big chunk of time – I need ~4 hours."
   b. Debunking: Of course there's no time to write! Academic medicine has never been busier or more stressful! There's also no time to exercise, eat right, sleep, or relax. But everyone has the same 24 hours in a day with a hundred competing demands and some still manage to do it (write). Make a decision to be one of those people. Is there something you find time to do every day (e.g., exercise, Starbucks, reading the news, internet surfing)? Why not writing? Important: you need less time than you think. People who write for long stretches (unplanned/binges) get less done with more stress than people who write for brief, daily stretches. Why? You don't waste time figuring out where you were and writing then becomes less emotionally-charged. Can't find 30 minutes? How about 10?
   c. Suggestions: (1) Because time is so precious, we're tempted to multi-task. Don't - it kills your focus; (2) Delegate if possible (is a co-author really good at ___? Triage!); (3) Schedule *your* priorities (proactive) vs. Prioritizing your schedule (reactive) – schedule daily writing; (4) Review your calendar. Track your time for a week - is your time and effort aligned with your life mission? Check-out Franklin Covey's Time Management Matrix. Avoid the tyranny of the urgent and the conspiracy of interruption!

3. **I have trouble starting**
   a. Barrier: "I don't know how to do _____," "I've been putting off the _____ because I hate that part." Corollary: "I spent all my time on the _____ because I love that part."
   b. Demystifying: Is this your checklist: "Work on grant," "Write XYZ paper" "Do analysis,"? Of course this is an overwhelming task! It's the difference between broad goals vs. SMART objectives.
   c. Suggestions: (1) Templates! Mimic the format, style, formula of published papers in "that" journal; (2) learn to delegate to coauthors – you don't have to be and do everything yourself; (3) robotize (project manage) your work. If you told a robot: "Finish results section!" – it wouldn't know what to do. Instead, tell the robot: "Open data file, run descriptive on final study groups, double-check ANOVA results, copy means, SDs, and p-values into table…." (4) Do a work-flow analysis - calculate how much time each of your writing tasks *really* takes (e.g. 1 minute to open file or really 20 mins. because you can't remember where it is? 2 minutes for descriptives or 10 because you can't remember how you coded the groups? 2 minutes to double-check ANOVAs or 15 to re-run just because you're compulsive?) – your 10 minute task might really be 50-minutes. Be realistic.

4. **I'm not ready to start writing**
   a. Barrier: "I need: more data, to run more models, to read more literature." Corollary: "I am stuck because I'm waiting for a co-author's feedback."
   b. Demystifying: Are you ever *really* ready to write? There's rarely an ideal time for anything. Forget about the New Year, Mondays, the weekend - just start already!
   c. Suggestions: (1) Start writing the paper as soon as you have the idea. Write throughout the process – it will help you refine your ideas - you will get more done and waste less time. After all, writing is not what we do AFTER we've figured it out, writing is HOW we figure it out! (2) Expand your definition of writing. Writing isn't just literally typing words, sentences, and paragraphs. Writing is ANY activity that directly/indirectly causes more lines to appear on your biosketch! (e.g., freewriting about an idea, reviewing notes, working on a table/figure, entering references, writing a cover letter, reviewing a paper, etc.).
5. **I have trouble finishing**
   a. Barrier: "I just want to read X more papers," "I just want to collect a bit more data/run a few more models," "I need to re-read it again for the umpteenth time."
   b. Demystifying: Perfect is the enemy of good enough. Don't let your perfectionism thwart your progress.
   c. Suggestions: Limit the amount of time and effort you expend. For example, for your literature review, decide how many articles you'll read, from how far back, and/or for how many hours. For data collection – target sample size/date and then stop. For analysis – decide how many hours will you spend, how many models you will run. For your and your co-authors' editing – set hour-limits and firm deadlines.

Adopt a mantra! <u>Writing is my job. I do my job every day</u>.

References:
<u>How to Write a Lot</u>, by Paul Silvia (2007)
<u>Advice for New Faculty Members</u>, by Robert Boice (2000)

Other Recommended Reading:
<u>The Power of Habit: Why we do what we do in life and business</u>, by Charles Duhigg (2012)
<u>Getting Things Done: The art of stress-free productivity</u>, by David Allen (2002)

Writing Apps & Programs
> Scrivener
> writeordie.com
> Academicladder.com

Time Mgt. Apps & Programs
> Basecamp
> Focus Booster
> FocusTime
> MyLifeOrganized (MLO)
> Pomodoro
> Remember the Milk
> Rescue Time
> Timeful (Intelligent Time Assistance)
> Toggl

Blogs
> http://getalifephd.blogspot.com/
> http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/