

Reading and Writing during Covid-19

Strategies for productivity

May 2020



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FORECAST

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						
						



Help!

The Thesis Whisperer

- **Just listening to the news in the morning feels like an emotional rollercoaster, fuelling more fear and doubt. This atmosphere can make it hard to get on with the complex, interrelated tasks necessary to completing a research project.**
- *The Thesis Whisperer, Dr Inger Mewburn, Australian National University, <https://thesiswhisperer.com/>*



Don't be hard on yourself

- **Each of you is responding to a unique set of personal circumstances, geographic factors, and institutional policies, but nobody should be pressured to be productive during this time. I think this bears repeating: events beyond your control have dramatically altered the conditions under which you are working, and you shouldn't be required to act as though that weren't happening.**
- *Rachael Cayley, associate professor, Graduate Centre for Academic Communication, School of Graduate Studies, University of Toronto.*



Inertia and momentum

However, life goes on and it is possible to shift from the inertia that may have overcome you, to momentum. When you overcome inertia and achieve momentum, you can start to build your Covid-19 productivity. Sometimes it just takes a few simple steps to get going.

INERTIA:

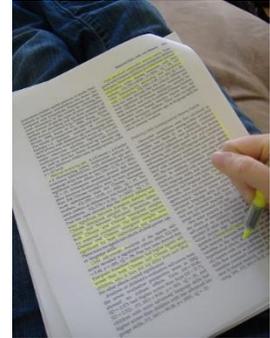
An object at rest tends to stay at rest unless acted upon by an outside force.



M o m e n t u m

Reading & writing may actually help

- In some ways, getting on track with reading and writing may help revive a sense of normality as well as kick-start momentum
- The acts of reading and writing can in themselves be calming
- Everyone is different. My advice is to set aside some dedicated time for reading and writing and see if you can adapt strategies to build your momentum.
- **Going slowly is fine**



Reading and flying

- **To read is to fly: it is to soar to a point of vantage which gives a view over wide terrains of history, human variety, ideas, shared experience and the fruits of many inquiries.**

- *A C Grayling, philosopher*



Reading

- Reading for a research degree is hard even without a pandemic
- Factor this difficulty into your planning
- *“A journey of a thousand miles begins with the ground beneath your feet.”*
- Where are you now, and what do you need to read? Compile a list, then work out an order

Reading *and retaining*

- Reading is one thing. Retaining what you have read is another
- While automated systems such as Endnote can certainly help, in my view manual systems help to embed the knowledge in your brain (*I will show a possible method later*)
- Developing a way to capture information from your reading *as you go* is good practice

Reading strategies

- Be ruthless (*only read what you know you have to read*)
- Be slow (*if you slow down a bit, you might be able to take in what you are reading*)
- Be predictable (*have set reading times, and stick to them*)
- Be methodical (*develop simple ways to capture the main points in the text*)
- Be realistic (*do not expect miracles*)

Less haste, more speed

- When you try to read too quickly, you end up being less effective
- Jamming you head with lots of reading in a short time frame will lead to migraines and memory problems, as well as mental blocks
- Particularly now, when so many normal things are more difficult, **be realistic** about what you are able to achieve

Tips

- **Triage** (*your project reading should be targeted*)
- **Prioritise** (*develop a logical order – I suggest that you choose the easiest texts first*)
- **Skim** (*read the abstract first, then intro and conclusion. Only proceed to methods and results if you need that level of detail*)
- **Parallel read if applicable** (*find plain English accounts of research, in New Scientist, Scientific American, The Economist, etc*)
- **Adopt simple but robust capture techniques** (*such as grids – see next slide*)
- **Reward yourself** (*if you meet your reading goals, give yourself something nice. Keep your goals modest, so you earn lots of treats!*)

Capturing information

- Develop a way that suits you. Here is just one example:

	5 Categories				
	Research question	Theoretical framework	Methodology	Results	Conclusions
Source 1					
Source 2					
...					

Consider starting a journal club

- Create a small group (about 4-5 people) and have regular Zoom sessions to discuss the latest literature.
- Develop a framework for discussion that involves looking at methods, analysis, results, and also the way the article is written
- Each member in turn should choose a new article, and the person who chose the article should lead discussion
- Discussing what you have read can help embed the knowledge

To sum up reading

- Build your momentum by reading small amounts of easier material until you are able to read in greater depth
- Do not attempt to read too much
- Reward yourself
- Discuss your reading with others
- Record information from your reading as you go
- *Oh, and this is a personal suggestion – read lots of beautiful prose for pleasure, so it is not all work.*

Short pause to answer questions

- If anyone has sent questions about **reading** using the chat function, I will attempt to answer them now
- You will have the same opportunity after we have talked about writing. Please keep your writing questions until then
- Please do not ask questions about your candidature. Contact grs@jcu.edu.au if you have candidature questions

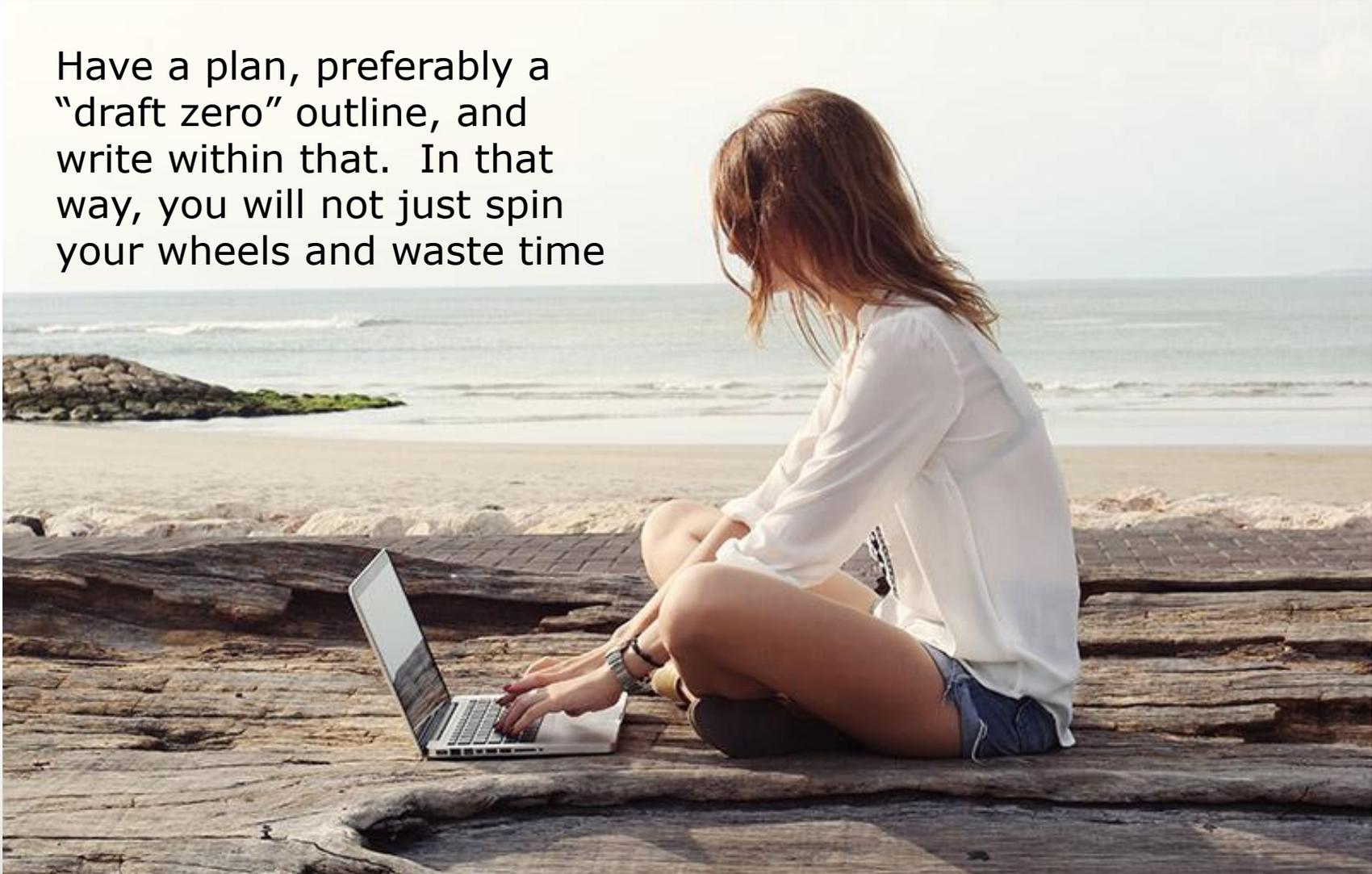


Writing

- For many people, having more time at home does not equal being a more productive writer
- In some cases, you might be having to work with children or other adults in the house who would normally be somewhere else
- The consequent distractions mean that writing slips down the list of priorities, or you find yourself starting at a blank screen while your mind either races or just stays completely still

I do not believe in writing aimlessly

Have a plan, preferably a “draft zero” outline, and write within that. In that way, you will not just spin your wheels and waste time



Achievable goals

- Do not attempt to binge write (*unless you suddenly find yourself in “the zone”, in which case let it rip*)
- Instead, set aside (and defend) writing times that align with the ways you best work
- Write out of sequence – **only write today what you feel prepared to write**
- Write small chunks. For example, you may set a goal of one paragraph per day, or one page per day

An achievable goal: writing your 'thesis'

- Writing a **thesis statement** is useful even without a pandemic
- All HDR candidates should be able to clearly state the core of their argument, the 'thesis' in its truest sense
- The thesis is the new idea that you wish to establish in your piece of writing. The original meaning of 'thesis' was 'intellectual proposition'
- Your thesis should be '**new, true and significant**' (John Gerring et al)
- Practise stating it clearly and effectively. When you do, you have a small victory.

If you have results, answer some questions

- Answering these questions can **get your writing momentum going** + you can produce refined wording to include in your final product:
- How do your findings fit with what is already known?
(Write a sentence or two)
- How do they differ? *(Ditto)*
- What conclusions can justifiably be drawn from your results when they are read in concert with existing knowledge? *(Challenge yourself to write a brief account)*

More questions to help guide your writing

- **What do my results *say*?** (Keep your answer to no more than two sentences)
- **Who needs to know about these results?** (Who is your audience for this research?)
- **Why do they need to know?** (What contribution will this work make to others in the field?)

Other short writing tasks

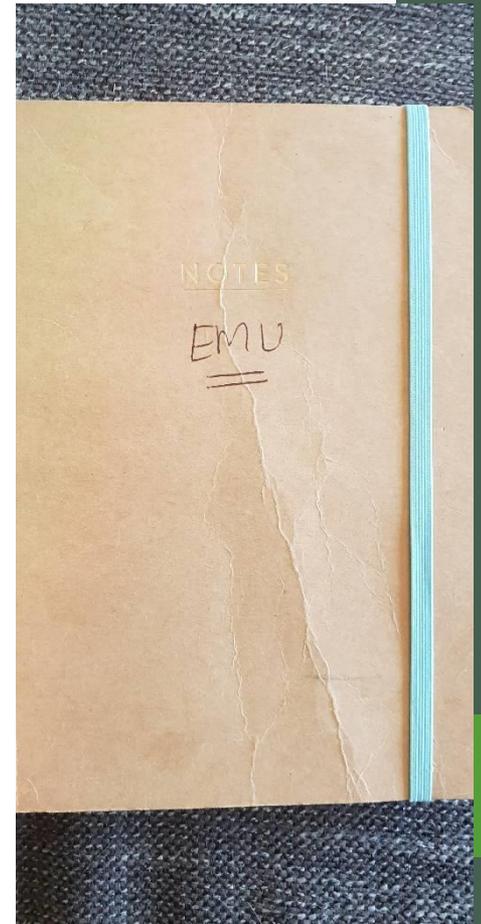
- Write definitions of your key project terms and concepts. Experiment with how you describe these elements. Write simply and clearly.
- What are the major relationships, trends and patterns in the literature and in your own results? Write short statements about these
- Write the first sentence of your thesis (*even if you have only just commenced*).

Use your thesis abstract to focus

- Your thesis abstract is an excellent piece of writing to work on now
- Use this document as a way to achieve momentum
- Work on it at least every week, possibly more often
- As you refine your abstract, you refine your understanding of your project

Keep a notebook

- This will not suit everyone, but I find it useful
- When I was about to begin researching my next book, I bought a simple notebook, and wrote the main key word from my book on the cover
- I use this notebook to write anything I think of that might be useful later
- I have found that this can prompt me even months later to follow up on something I might otherwise have forgotten



Work on your clarity

- Now is a good time to go back to the basics in academic communication
- Complex ideas should be expressed simply, using straightforward sentences that are not overly complicated
- As a guide, try to ensure that the first sentence of each paragraph (known as the **theme sentence**) does not exceed 25 words. Set this as a challenge
- Subsequent sentences may be between five and 50 words, with either extreme rare
- Some days, you might just want to write a single, beautifully crafted sentence. That's a great goal! Once you have written a sentence you are happy with, perhaps you will feel like writing another one. **Momentum...**



Three ingredients of clarity

- Clarity is such a valuable quality in academic work. Here are its elements:
- **Simplicity** means getting straight to the point and avoiding unnecessary complexity;
- **Familiarity** means using words and ideas that your reader will recognise; and
- **Visibility** means creating mental pictures that the reader will “see” (*concrete writing*).

The “when-then” strategy

- A ‘when-then’ plan triggers your brain into action, so one activity becomes fused to another.
- This formulation allows you to work around your distractions as they occur. For example:
- **When** I write, **then** I’ll leave my phone in another room.
- **When** my writing time gets overrun by other responsibilities in the morning, **then** I’ll write for 30 minutes in the evening.
- **When** I feel unfocused and anxious, **then** I’ll take a break for 15 minutes.

• *Adapted from Chris Smith, “5 Strategies for writing in turbulent times”, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2020/03/30/5-strategies-for-writing-in-turbulent-times/>*

Shut up and write!

- Shut up and write is a popular way to write in the company of other HDR candidates using a formula known as “pomodoro”
- Please see the GRS Facebook page for information about Shut up and Write, or watch for notices from the GRS



Writer's block

- Unblock by working on what you feel drawn to today. Your brain may want to work on your statement of overarching aim, your article or thesis abstract, or a chapter sub-section
- When you start writing, momentum replaces inertia
- Never, under any circumstances, sit around waiting for “inspiration”. Inspiration never arrives. Start work, then get inspired by the work you are doing.

If you cannot write, edit

- Maybe now is *not* the right time for you to be writing new material
- However, you may be able to get your brain onto the task of editing your existing work
- Editing your work is a bigger and more involved task than writing the first draft
- Writing explores meaning but editing truly reveals it. Editing can greatly deepen your understanding of your own topic



"I spent all morning taking out a comma and all afternoon putting it back"
Attributed to Oscar Wilde

ATWW, AoAW and AoAE

- My Academic and Thesis Writing Workshops (ATWW) will be going ahead via Zoom from 4 June for six weeks
- Also, my online modules Art of Academic Writing (AoAW) and Art of Academic Editing (AoAE) are available anytime on LearnJCU



The screenshot shows the homepage of the 'Art of Academic Writing' website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the James Cook University Australia logo on the left and a menu with items: 'Good practice', 'Literature reviews', 'Journals', 'Correctness', and 'About'. Below the navigation bar is a header image featuring a brick wall and a person's hair. The main content area has a heading 'Welcome to the Art of Academic Writing' followed by a paragraph of introductory text.

Page tools

JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Art of Academic Writing

Good practice Literature reviews Journals Correctness About

Welcome to the Art of Academic Writing

My name is Liz Tynan and I am the author of this course. The idea behind it is to give you both practical and conceptual tools for approaching your thesis writing. Writing is a great adventure and can be satisfying and enjoyable. The process can also be daunting, particularly for people who have not done a lot of writing in the past. Having some guidelines helps, and I will be doing what I can to put these in place for you. Many of the techniques and skills I am going to outline here are best incorporated into your work at an early stage, even as you are planning your program of work. Because writing is not separate from thinking, planning your approach right from the start will help you create the best possible final product.

Working at home

- There are some good things about working from home
- Try to set up your home work life to emphasise the positives and try not to fight the negatives. If your cats want to help, let them.
- Go with the flow. **Everything will be okay.**



Now some writing questions

- I will answer some of your writing questions now, from the Chat function
- Again, please keep your questions focused on our topic today, rather than broader candidature issues



A final thought for today

**I only write when I'm
inspired, so I see to
it that I'm inspired
every morning at
nine o'clock.**

Peter De Vries, American editor and writer

