

A Summary of the Book,
Publish & Flourish: Become a Prolific Scholar
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Available for sale at www.teaching.nmsu.edu.

As a scholarly writer, you were probably educated at the School of Hard Knocks, but it's not the only school or even the best. Much is known about how to become more prolific—and any scholar can. Even when you can't work harder, there are important ways to work smarter. Every scholar can become more prolific and these steps can show you how.

Step 1. Differentiate between the urgent and the important (Covey, 1994, p. 33). Important activities move you closer to your goals but you must typically act on them. Important activities have significant consequences if left undone. Urgent activities seem to need to be done right now, but they act on you (a ringing phone, a beeping email). Urgent things also seem to have deadlines and other people involved; completing them makes you feel useful. Teaching and some service are both urgent and important. Research and writing may not be urgent but they are certainly important. To become a prolific writer, you must create a sense of urgency around your writing because urgent things get done. The next two steps help you create that sense of urgency.

Step 2. Write daily for 15 to 30 minutes. Most scholars believe that writing requires big blocks of time. Research shows that scholars who write daily publish far more than those who write in big blocks of time. The problem with big blocks of time is we don't find them very often. In one study, participants who wrote daily wrote twice as many hours as those who wrote occasionally in big blocks of time but generated ten times as many published articles (Boice, 2000, p. 144). In other words, the group that wrote daily was five times as efficient per minute. But beware: To get these benefits, you will need more than resolve—you will need to keep records of your minutes spent writing each day and share your records with someone each week.

Step 3. Keep records of time spent writing daily and share your records weekly. Writing daily will increase your productivity as a writer by many times if you keep records daily—and share them with someone weekly. What difference does keeping records make? In one study, all the participants attended workshops by Robert Boice, who explained the importance of writing daily and keeping records of minutes written. At the end of the workshop, one group of participants did not agree to change their habits, which resulted in their continuing to write the way they had always written, which was occasionally, in big blocks of time. Another group promised to write daily and to keep daily records of their time spent writing: The second group was able to out-perform the first group by a factor of *four*. In this same study, a third group of participants took the same measures as the second group (writing daily and keeping records), but the third group also held themselves accountable to someone for writing daily. The third group wrote more than the first group by a factor of *nine*. The numbers look like this in pages

written or revised per year: Seventeen pages for the first group that wrote in big blocks of time; 64 pages for the group that wrote daily and kept records; and 157 pages for the group that wrote daily, kept records and held themselves accountable to others for writing daily (Boice, 1989, pp. 605-611).

Step 4. Write from the first day of your research project. Write every day no matter how rough the writing. Write from your heart, from what you feel and know, and leave blanks to fill in from the literature and the research later. Each paragraph you write doesn't have to become a paragraph that will later go into a certain section of your paper such as the introduction or the literature review or the methods. What you write can just be your own thinking and musings on the subject. Write in your journal or imagine you are writing a letter to yourself: "I don't know why I got the results I got in the lab today. . ." "Perhaps it was because. . ." "No, I don't think so. I think the reason was. . ." "Tomorrow I will try something different. . ." The crudest writing about a given idea is superior to the best thinking because it can be saved, reviewed, and revised later. Write from the very first day of your research project: Research as you write and write as you research.

Step 5. Post your thesis on the wall and write to it. When you sit down to write, take a stab at describing what you going to write about: Start with something simple—your topic, just a word, or a phrase even. Then develop it into a sentence. Don't try to write the perfect sentence. Just jot down something quickly. Know that this is a working thesis. You can change it at any time—you can and you should. Ideally, you want a sentence that is short and memorable and tells your reader what is at stake or what problem you are trying to solve. Remember, you're not trying to prove the point—you have the rest of the paper to do that—you are just asserting it. Post your thesis on the wall and write to it. Never, ever lose sight of it. Work back and forth between your thesis and the rest of your paper—revising first one and then the other.

Step 6. Organize around key sentences. Ideally, the topic of each paragraph should be explained in one sentence located early in the paragraph and supported by the rest of the paragraph. These key or topic sentences help readers negotiate each paragraph quickly and well. A key sentence is much like a topic sentence: It announces the topic of the paragraph simply and with little detail (Williams, 1990, pp. 97-105). It announces the topic without trying to prove the point: The rest of the paragraph serves that function. A key sentence differs from what many people were taught about topic sentences because a key sentence need not be the first sentence in a paragraph (Williams, 1990, pp. 90 & 101).

Step 7. Use key sentences as an after-the-fact outline. Now, list your key sentences—and headings—so that they provide an after-the-fact outline (Booth, Colomb & Williams, 2003, pp. 213 & 188). Read your list two times. The first time you read it, check to see if everything in your paper aligns with your purpose (thesis). If any key sentence doesn't align with the purpose, you should either rewrite the sentence or rewrite the thesis. The second time you read your list, check for organization. Ask yourself how the key sentences could be better organized, by which I mean more logical or more coherent?

Again, if any key sentence is less than logical or coherent, rewrite the sentence or the paragraph.

Step 8. Share early drafts with non-experts and later drafts with experts. When you read your own stuff, you are not really reading, but reviewing what you were thinking at the time (Booth, Colomb & Williams, 2003, pp. 208 & 263). Therefore, you consistently overestimate what your reader knows. In fact, overestimating what your reader knows is the biggest source of communication problems. As a result, your reader is in trouble more than half the time (McCloskey, 1985, p. 192). So start a dialog with your readers. Stop imagining what your readers know and start answering their stated questions.

Share more drafts of your work, starting sooner, than you ever thought possible. Share different drafts of your work with readers with different levels of expertise: non-experts, experts, and Capital-E Experts. Non-experts include anyone who does not share a terminal degree in your discipline, such as your spouse, undergraduate or graduate students, or colleagues in other disciplines. Experts include any scholar with a terminal degree in your discipline, including colleagues in your department now and those with whom you went to graduate school. Capital-E Experts include the best-known scholars in the exact area in which you are writing.

Step 9. Learn how to listen. Learn how to listen better. To do so, you must first come to terms with the fact that, when it comes to clarity, the reader is always right. “Clarity is a social matter, not something to be decided unilaterally by the writer. The reader like the consumer is sovereign. If the reader thinks something you write is unclear, then it is, by definition.” There’s no arguing (McCloskey, 2000, p. 12). Instead of arguing, try saying things that keep your reader talking like, “Say more about that” or “How might I do that?” Avoid saying words like “no” or “but.”

Step 10. Respond to each specific criticism. It is tempting to conclude that when the reviewers don’t make the same suggestions, they disagree. When researchers examined scholarly reviews, they found that reviewers gave good [specific] advice and did not contradict each other (Fiske & Fogg, 1990, pp. 591-597). Don’t expect reviewers—or other readers—to make exactly the same comments. One reader will criticize the literature review, while another will find fault with the methods, and yet another will take umbrage with the findings. Know that if you make changes in response to each of these readers, you will improve the paper and reduce the chance that other readers will find fault with the manuscript. Think of each specific concern as a hole in your rhetorical “dam.” The more holes you plug, the better your argument will “hold water.”

Step 11. Read your prose out loud. To polish your prose, you should read it out loud to someone—or have someone read it out loud to you. As you read listen for excessive precision that “hides a major point behind a dozen minor ones” (McCloskey 1985:192).

Step 12. Kick it out the door and make ’em say “No.” You are almost ready to send your paper out, but two obstacles remain: perfectionism and fear of rejection. Expect rejection

and plan for it. Select three journals for every manuscript. Address three envelopes—and stamp them. By choosing three journals, you have a long-term plan for your paper. If your paper is rejected at the first journal, you are prepared to send it to the second journal without the usual delay. And keep your perfectionism in check. You may say that your paper is not really done. It could be better. That’s true today, it will be true tomorrow, and it will be true 100 years from now. Artists are encouraged not to over-paint a picture, and bury a good idea in a muddy mess. And so it is for writers: You must find the balance between “making it better and getting it done” (Becker, 1986, p. 122). You’ve written it. Trusted colleagues have read it. You’ve responded to their criticisms—it’s time to kick it out the door. Don’t worry—anonymous reviewers are not known for being over-kind. Your job is to write it and mail it. The reviewer’s job is to tell you if it will embarrass you publicly. You’ve done your job so make ’em do theirs: Kick it out the door and make ’em say “YES!”

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