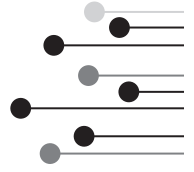# Introductory Chapter

Getting Started With Your Writing

Scholarly, academic writing can seem mystifying at times. Being a successful academic means that a new scholar becomes productive by translating ideas into research and research into publications. Publishing productivity may vary by institution. However, publications define a scholar's contributions to their field. This book can "teach" a young scholar how to develop the discipline and skill to be productive. The authors offer themselves as examples and have compiled strategies, activities, and concrete suggestions for increasing writing productivity.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce strategic, targeted scholarly writing productivity supports specifically directed at doctoral students, newly minted PhDs, and novice researchers, providing a means for both focusing and advancing individual interests and ideas regarding research and translating those ideas and subsequent research findings into viable and successful publications. A great deal of preparation and intentional, strategic thinking is involved in realizing a successful career as an academic. In this chapter, readers will learn how to focus ideas for research and successive publication.

Learning Objectives

There are three learning objectives for this chapter:

1. Develop a targeted research topic.

2. Increase understanding of how to craft problem statements and solution statements as initial writing activities.

3. Improve ways to merge personal interests and passion with viable research topics and subsequent writing.

Premise of This Book

We came together to write this book out of experience and necessity. It is the guide we wished we had owned—in graduate school pursuing a PhD. This text is also the guidebook we immediately needed as we left the seemingly safe and

familiar world of graduate school as doctoral candidates and embarked on our first jobs in academia as scholars. But, it is also the text we urgently need now as we advise and direct those students of our own who are pursuing a doctorate and readying themselves to launch into the professorate. As authors, we have varying degrees of expertise, and we possess distinct skill sets as they pertain to research, writing, publishing, and productivity. As scholars, we understand what success in academia demands, and we wrote this book to make that journey, not easier, but more accessible by demystifying the processes of productivity and publishing.

Source: iStock, smolaw11

We needed such a book although we were prepared as we initially entered academia. All four of us claim excellent preparation and mentorship—for writing up a PhD study. We learned from amazing scholars at several prestigious and well-recognized universities in the United States (US)—three are **research 1 institutions** and one is a well-known, urban, **regional institution**. We had exceptional professors and advisors. They counseled us well, advised us on classes that would develop and hone our research skills, held us accountable for our emerging scholarship, and provided us support and feedback—to write a dissertation. We can all remember being counseled to find a niche, to develop a **research agenda**, and to publish.

But what wasn't so clear sometimes while we were reading, researching, and writing a dissertation was how to craft a research agenda with coherence beyond our dissertation study and how to create a **research trajectory**. Culling articles from our dissertation was advice we all recall. But it was less clear, as we were awarded our doctoral degrees and started our first jobs in academia, how to

merge our interests and passions with current issues in our respective fields and launch a career in academia. We were provided the requisite five-chapter formula for our dissertations, and one of us pushed the envelope (with encouragement) to seven chapters, but the advice about writing an article and finding a publication home for scholarly writing was generally absent. Encouragement was plentiful, but the nitty gritty details of moving from idea to manuscript was limited. Hereafter, we recount some specific examples of the advice we received and our responses and reflection about that advice.

Authorship advice and guidelines provided about negotiating order on publications that were coauthored were nebulous. Advice such as "the order of authorship follows effort" turned out to be vague and unhelpful. Recommendations were scarce and, oftentimes, ill-defined. Collaboration wasn't addressed sufficiently. Collectively, we all remember being prompted as graduate students to "find a **writing group**," as efficacious advice, but specifics about how writing groups function, or differing kinds of writing groups, were not forthcoming. For example, we needed sound advice, how to actually form a writing group, guidance on setting ground rules, information about how writing groups can function, and how to sustain the momentum when in a writing group.

There was a paucity of advice and information about how to handle **rejection** and how to either systematically **revise and resubmit** or seek a new publication venue. Limited guidance was provided about weaving our interests into conference proposals, grant proposals, or how to prepare a book proposal. Again, we were encouraged to do all of the above, but the finite steps and strategies to realize success often eluded, escaped, and at times, baffled us.

And, academia shifts. As academics, we have witnessed changes. One example of such a shift is the ever-increasing scrutiny around **metrics**. Within the last ten years, the use of citations as a measure of productivity has blossomed. With an eye toward quality and a rise in online and open-access publication outlets, institutions have put a greater focus on metrics. **Citation management software** attests to this increase. In tandem, **impact factors** and rankings for journals and publishing houses have become an entrenched aspect of evaluating scholars' productivity.

Authors' Message to Readers on How to Use This Book

As authors and scholars, we assume those who read this text will approach it from differing viewpoints and that readers will have different needs and interests in selecting this text. Our intention is for readers to use it as a pedagogical tool to increase productivity success and publishing savvy. We represent various levels of academic rank. At the time this was written, three of us have earned the rank of full professor, and one of us is an associate professor who recently earned tenure. Although we approached **tenure and promotion** differently and in different contexts, we share the experience as we were all assistant professors, faced with being productive and achieving success within

our individual institutions' tenure and promotion processes. We wrote this book as a tool to help others learn from our paths to success. Chapters in this book spiral; they certainly build upon one another, yet they can also serve as stand-alone guides for achieving strategically targeted skill sets for increasing productivity and publishing.

In this text, readers will find eleven distinct chapters that provide useful knowledge about increasing publishing and productivity and a final chapter with additional writing activities, designed to stimulate publishing productivity. In many chapters, we attempt to clarify the academic writing and publishing processes through frank discussion and practical exercises that address chapter objectives. From creating writing and publishing goals (Chapter 1) and writing a journal or book chapter manuscript (Chapters 2–3), choosing an appropriate publishing outlet (Chapter 4), and moving the manuscript through the submission and revision process (Chapters 5–6) to promoting your work (Chapter 7) and leveraging your scholarship (Chapter 8), to finally examining institutional expectations and requirements for evaluation, promotion, and/or tenure in regard to writing, we hope this book helps the many striving academics who may be asking themselves "so, what do I do now?" The chapters of this book are presented as successive rungs of productivity in publishing. While it is not necessary to follow the chapters in the order they are presented within the text, we felt it was important to showcase the sequence and interconnectedness of the practices of academic writing. In making clear the practices, we believe we are demystifying the publication process.

With the end in mind—success as scholars matriculating through the rank, and scholars who negotiated the process—we want to start with how doctoral students, newly minted PhDs, and novice researchers can generate ideas for writing that are sourced from issues that they care about.

Generating Ideas for Writing

For some, but not all, doctoral candidates and beginning researchers and scholars, getting started with academic research, writing, and publishing feels overwhelming. Interest and passion can be used as a catalyst for generating ideas that can come to fruition as published pieces. We often joke about research and manuscripts as being comparable to relationships. How are they similar, readers might ask? In a relationship, if there is a sense of liking someone, it's easier to circumvent the pitfalls, challenges, and difficulties of what may be encountered in the life of a relationship.

The same holds true for researching and writing. A simple exercise can help to focus interests in a way that may be beneficial to the whole process. The premise is the same as the relationship example provided; if you have a genuine interest in an issue, you are more likely to persist when the work becomes tedious or difficult. In particular, selecting a dissertation topic feels daunting to many students. Some feel torn between investigating what they care about and have an interest in or trying to find a niche. A niche or specialty area often develops with practice and over time.

Source: iStock, fizkes

Activity 1.1 is a simple exercise to encourage readers to consider what interests them, and then seek out connections between interests and ideas for potential studies and subsequent publications based on research. The two-part process honors interests and allows for choice, with choice being a prime motivator when writing. If you are seeking a thesis or dissertation topic, or if you are searching for a new research idea, use the following activity to catalog your interests in a straightforward and uncomplicated manner.

Activity 1.1 Research Exercise

List four to five issues about which you are passionate:

-
-
-
-
-

Do any of them connect? How? Why?

Consider as a possible research possibility.

Moving From Idea to Manuscript

Once an individual has an idea of what they want to research and that topic aligns with their interests and, perhaps, passions, a simple writing exercise can assist with focusing that idea on a viable topic. Begin by listing the big question—what is happening? Or, what is the problem? Think: the problem is … and a possible solution is … This leads to writing a simple problem statement, keeping in mind what your research seeks to do is fill a gap that exists. The simple act of writing a statement can start the process of formulating thoughts and articulating ideas clearly.

Here is an example. *Teachers of elementary-aged students lack skill in assisting students with second language acquisition.* This is the problem statement. However, additional detail is still needed. Novice scholars can ask themselves where does the problem exist and within what population? And, what detail adds specificity to the problem? The problem statement can be further expanded by adding detail and specificity. When producing academic writing, all descriptors must be definitive. In the case of this example, precise description needs to be added as the problem statement is quite vague. Further description narrows the focus as in this extended example: *In South Louisiana, where public schools have experienced an increase of English Language Learners, teachers of elementary-aged students in first and second grade lack skill in assisting students with second language acquisition in the disciple specific area of English language arts.*

Next comes how to address this issue. For the sake of the example, solutions might be couched as a solution statement that adequately captures what can be conducted to address the issue: *Targeted, strategic professional development can increase teachers' awareness of strategies to teach second language learners and increase teaching capacity and skill.* Likewise, the solution statement needs refinement and additional specificity: *School-level leaders can provide targeted, strategic professional development in oral language acquisition that results in increasing first and second grade teachers' awareness of developmentally appropriate oral language strategies to teach second language learners while increasing teaching capacity.*

Now it is the reader's turn. Activity 1.2 requires readers to craft two statements, a problem statement and a solution statement. Begin with the responses rendered in Activity 1.1. Create a jot list of specific terms that address the ways in which your interest coalesced.

Activity 1.2 Writing Problem Statements and Solution Statements

Using the following simple formula, write an initial problem statement either on paper or while composing at the keyboard. This is a personal preference, so use the technique that fits your style. (1) The problem is…

After writing an initial draft, go back and revise adding detail and specifics. Read it out loud for flow and cohesion. What other details can you add to increase specificity and thus, narrow the topic? Continue to revise until you are satisfied with your problem statement.

Repeat this process with a solution statement. Again, create a jot list of specific terms that address the ways in which you intend to address the problem or issue. (2) The solution is …

Revise by adding additional detail and specifics. Read it out loud for flow and cohesion. Does the solution align with the problem statement? What other details can you add to increase specificity and narrow the solution? Continue to revise until you are satisfied with your solution statement.

Focusing Research on Passion and Pragmatics

Research should address pressing issues. Research should also involve an interest that can be sustained. All choices need to be grounded in the literature from related fields. The more definite descriptors are, the more targeted the literature review and the more focused the research and subsequent writing.

Working Hard But Smart While Maintaining a Passion for Research

Maximizing your time when writing and researching yields results. Typically, the more centered a study is on a precise statement of the problem and subsequent solution statement, the clearer the writing. And, from a productivity position, the more exacting a study's problem and solution statement, the more single-minded the work. Novice scholars and researchers can easily be distracted by interesting facets of a study. However, with practice, scholars learn to keep ideas germane to a central focus.

We return to the relationship analogy discussed earlier in this chapter. If earning a PhD, securing a job in academia, and being successful in publishing and

Source: iStock, katleho Seisa

productivity was easy, more individuals would pursue these paths. Scholarly, academic writing is difficult, demanding, and emotionally and physically draining work. It requires discipline, focus, and wise and strategic use of time. Without discipline and the budgeting of time, focus can be hard to maintain. Choice, personal interest, and passion can be prime motivators when writing. The activity in this chapter can shape writing in productive ways.

SUMMARY

In this introductory chapter, an activity to assist with focusing interest was provided as a way to allow readers to take what they are passionate about and craft that passion and interest into working problem and solution statements. Setting the stage for productivity is important. Here, we make an important distinction: graduate students learn the research process and acquire the skill sets to conduct research and produce a successful thesis or dissertation. New faculty members (novice researchers and novice scholars) begin an academic journey as researchers that results in successful productivity and publications as defined by their institution. In Chapter 2, we will discuss ways to add discipline by learning how to set manageable goals. Setting goals and creating a submission schedule for your academic writing add structure to publishing and productivity and address demystifying the processes of writing inherent in publishing. Each chapter defines the key terms germane to that chapter. In addition, each chapter contains critical thinking questions designed to extend considerations of information presented therein as well as additional references and works cited for each chapter.

KEY TERMS

The following key terms are defined here. Key terms will be used throughout this book and applied uniformly.

Citation Management Software Citation management software are tools that permit researchers and writers to both organize and store scholarly resources and citational information. Software such as Mendeley© and Zotero© assist writers with a means to create reference lists or bibliographic lists of citations from stored items. Different citation software offers distinctive qualities, and writers need to decide which tool works best for individual needs.

Impact Factor This is an indicator used to rate a journal's impact by calculating the total number of times the articles in a journal were cited in the two years prior to the year that the impact factor is calculated, divided by the total number of articles published during that time.

Metrics Citation metrics are a measurement of the impact of research which can be considered when deciding where to publish.

Regional Institution A regional institution in the United States is an institution of higher learning (IHL) that is generally designed to provide regional programming with a designated geographical area within a state or region of the country.

Rejection In academic publishing terms, a rejection is a category of response that indicates a manuscript submitted for publication is either deemed not an appropriate fit for a journal or publication or is of low quality in terms of writing style or scholarship. A rejection equates to a decision by the editor(s) not to accept for further consideration.

Research Agenda A research agenda is considered a formalized plan of research that encapsulates explicit, detailed issues and ideas in any given field of study. A research agenda is fluid, yet provides a specific plan of action for a scholar and can be viewed as a driving design that helps a scholar to prioritize projects, publications, and possibly, publication venues in a formalized and articulated manner.

Research 1 Institutions Based on the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, this designation is based on an institution's level of research activity; a research 1 university denotes a university in the United States engages in the highest levels of research activity. As a subset of doctoral degree–granting institutions that conduct research, research 1 institutions are characterized as having conferred at least 20 research and/or scholarship doctorates and were awarded at least $5 million in total research expenditures. In 2020, the top four were: (1) Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT); (2) University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) wherein as an example of high activity, every year since the 2009–2010 academic year, UCLA has averaged $1 billion in research funding; (3) Johns Hopkins University, founded in 1876 as the nation's first research university; and (4) Texas A & M University (TAMU) (https://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/).

Research Trajectory This concept involves having a clear and discernable research identity as a scholar. Creating a research trajectory usually involves assuming a theoretical stance or adopting a theoretical framework from which research emanates. A research trajectory can be considered a kind of road map of what research you intend to accomplish and the products of that research—publications. Having a clear identity and crafting a research trajectory helps not only to find an eventual job in academia, as jobs are posted by position and need, but also, having a clear research trajectory allows other researchers with similar interests and research objectives to connect with each other. Typically, a research trajectory contains specific research questions or problems or lines of inquiry and usually involves methods of inquiry and research designs.

Revise and Resubmit In academic publishing terms, a revise and resubmit decision is a category of response that indicates a manuscript submitted for publication is either deemed an appropriate fit for a journal or publication or is of significant quality in terms of writing style or scholarship. A revise and resubmit signifies a decision by the editor(s) to request additional edits and major revision before potential acceptance is offered. However, a revise and resubmit is not a guarantee of publication. Consider a revise and resubmit decision an invitation to do more work for further consideration.

Tenure and Promotion Tenure and promotion is both a process and a product. The process is similar as a scholar moves up academic ranks—from assistant to associate to full professor. Institutions with tenure and promotion have particular documents that outline the process for new employees. Specifically, these documents provide common criteria and guidelines for tenure and promotion. Usually, tenure and promotion involve three categories: research (also called discovery and/or productivity by some institutions), teaching, and service. Typically, a faculty member is expected to have established an original, coherent,

and meaningful research trajectory to earn tenure and promotion. Scholars are expected to provide evidence of research, teaching, and service. The type of institution usually dictates the percentage of a scholar's time devoted to these three categories. It is imperative to know your institution's policies and documents intimately; know where it is housed (e.g., Academic Affairs of the Provosts Office) and know the process at your institution.

Writing Group A writing group functions as a place where scholars produce writing in a dedicated space and allows for feedback and critique from members (Kelly, 2015). Writing groups provide scholars with constructive feedback as well as a social forum for academic writers to both connect and collaborate. Mechanisms for the frequency and duration of meetings and ground rules for functioning vary. There are no set rules, just guidelines that work for members. A writing group may form for a specific task or as a means of support for members who agree to come together to share and critique writing. Members can come from the same or dissimilar disciplines. Members of writing groups are equally responsible for reading and providing feedback. A writing group has no specific set number of members, although some scholars suggest a maximum of three (Curtis, 2011). A writing group can also provide a sense of accountability for members.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. What are current issues within my field of study?

    a. What are the problems that merit study within my field?

    b. What are possible solutions to these problems within my field?

2. How do my personal professional interests interface or intersect with issues prevalent within the field?

3. What tensions arise between and among different perspectives within my field?

4. What area of study should I capitalize on as I create a coherent research agenda and compile a research trajectory?

5. Is there a possible two- or three-prong approach to an issue or several related issues in my field that intersect and can provide facets of my research agenda?

6. With whom might I collaborate within my unit?

7. With whom might I collaborate across campus and beyond?

8. With whom might I form a writing group for support and accountability?

9. Who are my distant mentors or mentors-on-the-page whose work can help me frame the issues I am most interested in my field?

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

http://www.theglobalarc.org/what-we-do/civically-engaged-research.

https://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu.

https://thewritepractice.com/writers-group/.

https://www.meetup.com/topics/writing/.

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