

What's Their Secret? Tips from Successful Academic Writers in Health Professions Education

A panel discussion with Bridget O'Brien, PhD, Mytien Nguyen, Joshua Jauregui, MD, MHPE, Paula Thompson, PhD, and Bill Ventres, MD, MA, on March 26, 2025

The ways you define success in writing might change over time. It might start with getting a paper published in a high impact journal or with the number of publications you have. Then it might shift to writing a paper that gets readers thinking, validates their experiences, and contributes to the conversation on a topic. Success might also include helping others to find their voice and get published. Ultimately, it might be about having a positive impact on the field.

The panelists discussed Helen Sword's [Air & Light & Time & Space](#) guide to being a more productive and joyful academic writer. Using the [Writing BASE](#) diagnostic tool, the authors reflected on their own habits and offered suggestions to help you identify and broaden the behavioral, artisanal, social, and emotional dimensions of your writing practice.

Behavioral Habits: How do you carve out time to write?

- Make a plan but be flexible. Your life and career are always changing. Think about your personal and professional goals over a period of time (e.g., the next 3-6 months). Determine what you want to achieve in each area and how to balance your goals.
- Give yourself grace if you don't have a lot of time to write during periods of your career.
- Block off time for writing on your calendar.
- It's OK to take a break if you're feeling overwhelmed or if you're not feeling "in the zone." Acknowledge that and come back to the project later.
- Having multiple projects going at once can be helpful. If you're feeling stuck on one project, move on to another. Then go back to the first project after a break. Doing so can help you feel productive rather than frustrated.
- Find mentors! Both senior and near peer mentors can help you improve your writing. Don't be afraid to email your heroes and those scholars writing about topics that interest you.

Artisanal Habits: How do you try to improve your writing?

- Read the writing of others. Learn from what they do well and what they don't do well.
- Read fiction. It will help you think about how to craft the story you want to tell with your writing (see [It's a Story, Not a Study: Writing an Effective Research Paper](#) for more on this idea).
- Just write. The more you write the more you will improve.
- Write out what you want to say. Then go back and edit. Don't try to edit as you go.
- Seek feedback and consider it formative. Sharing your writing with others requires vulnerability but is very valuable. People in medical education really care, and they want to help you improve.
- Try writing shorter essays, letters, or commentaries if you're just starting out or to practice writing.

- Once your paper is written, look at it backwards, starting with the conclusion and discussion, so you can give the same energy and attention to the end of the paper as you do to the beginning.
- Check out [the Writer's Craft Collection](#) in the journal *Perspectives on Medical Education* for additional resources to enhance your writing.

Social Habits: How do you engage with others around writing?

- Find a writing accountability buddy who is at a similar career stage. Get together regularly in person or virtually to write. You can work on shared or separate projects.
- Share your writing with different people for different reasons (e.g., for content expertise, because you love how they write). Share your writing with friends outside medical education too to get different viewpoints.
- Ask for specific feedback (e.g., are the concepts sound, what kind of framework should I consider). Give a deadline for when you'd like that feedback back.
- Get away from your desk. Talk a walk and discuss your writing with a colleague. Go on a writing retreat, work on your writing and socialize with colleagues.
- When writing in a group, have the difficult conversations early on. Be sure everyone understands and agrees on their role, the schedule, and the process you all will use (e.g., who will work on what when, what tools will you use) as well as the final author order.
- It's OK to say no, kindly and professionally, if you're not able to take on a writing or feedback ask. Be open and upfront about what you can do. Consider passing on the first author role to someone else who has the time to get the paper over the finish line if you're not able to anymore.

Emotional Habits: How do you manage your emotions around writing?

- When you sit down to write, check in with yourself. Free yourself of other worries and distractions so you can focus on your writing. Depending on how you're feeling, it might be easier to write certain sections of your paper (e.g., the introduction and discussion when you're calm and can think deeply, the method and results when your emotions are heightened so you need more formulaic tasks). Or if you're not feeling creative and thoughtful, then use that time to do other work related to the project (e.g., organize the transcripts, send emails).
- It can be overwhelming and difficult to see lots of tracked changes when you receive feedback. You don't have to accept every piece of feedback you're given. Thoughtfully review each suggestion and determine its purpose and if it aligns with and improves your writing.
- Rejections happen. Have a list of possible publication options, so you can try somewhere else if one journal doesn't accept your paper. Use any feedback from the reject letter to improve your paper for the next journal.

Remember to write about what you love!