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## Slowpoke

How to be a faster writer.

By Michael Agger

Posted Wednesday, Aug. 10, 2011, at 11:45 AM ET



Can you make yourself write quickly?

Hunched over my keyboard, I'm haunted by anecdotes of faster writers. Christopher Hitchens [composing a Slate column in 20 minutes](#)—after a chemo session, after a "full" dinner party, late on a Sunday night. The infamously productive Trollope, who used customized paper! "He had a note pad that had been indexed to indicate intervals of 250 words," William F. Buckley [told the Paris Review](#). "He would force himself to write 250 words per 15 minutes.

Now, if at the end of 15 minutes he hadn't reached one of those little marks on his page, he would write faster." Buckley himself was a legend of speed—writing a complete book review in crosstown cabs and the like.

I remember, too, a former colleague who was blazingly fast. We would be joking at lunch—"Imagine if David Foster Wallace had written a children's book"—and there it would be in my inbox, 15 minutes later. Not a perfect draft, but publish-it-on-your-blog good. He could sit down at the keyboard and toss off Chopin or Ragtime, while I was banging away at Chopsticks and making lots of mistakes. Dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-du-dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-du-dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-DAH!

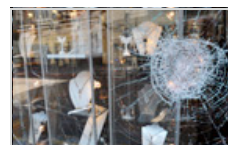
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It's no secret that writing is hard ... but why can't I be one of those special few for whom it comes easily? What am I doing wrong? Why haven't I gotten any faster?

In search of the secret of quickness, I started with a Malcolm Gladwell passage that's always piqued me. In *Outliers*, he discusses the now famous 10,000-hour rule—the amount of time it takes to achieve true mastery—and quotes the neurologist Daniel Levitin: "In study after study, of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice skaters, concern pianists, chess players, master criminals, and what have you, this number comes up again and again." Fiction writers? Really?

Had MFA students been sent to a lab and force-fed scones while they typed on their laptops? Or had some intrepid grad student done field research in the Starbucks of the Eastern seaboard? Alas, nothing so interesting, but

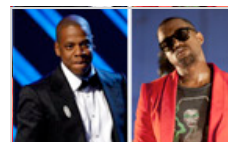
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something ultimately more fascinating. Gladwell led me to a chapter in [The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance](#)—the much-cited but little-read (by regular people) academic tome. "Professional Writing Expertise," by Ronald Kellogg, contains enough writerly insight to fuel a thousand Iowa workshops. And the opening words could not be more comforting: "Writing extended texts for publication is a major cognitive challenge, even for professionals who compose for a living." See, Dad! This is hard work.

Kellogg, a psychologist at Saint Louis University, tours the research in the field, where many of the landmarks are his own. Some writers are "Beethovians" who disdain outlines and notes and instead "compose rough drafts immediately to discover what they have to say." Others are "Mozartians"—cough, cough—who have been known to "delay drafting for lengthy periods of time in order to allow for extensive reflection and planning." According to Kellogg, perfect-first-drafters and full-steam-headers report the same amount of productivity. Methinks someone is lying. And feel free to quote this line the next time an editor is nudging you for copy: "Although prewriting can be brief, experts approaching a serious writing assignment may spend hours, days, or weeks thinking about the task before initiating the draft."

The scientifically-tested fun facts abound. Ann Chenoweth and John Hayes (2001) found that sentences are generated in a burst-pause-evaluate, burst-pause-evaluate pattern, with more experienced writers producing longer word bursts. A curly-haired girl on a white porch swing on a hot summer day will be more likely to remember what you've written if you employ concrete language—so says a 1995 study. S. K. Perry reports that the promise of money has a way of stimulating writerly "flow." Amazing! One also finds dreadful confirmation of one's worst habits: "Binge writing—hypomaniac, euphoric marathon sessions to meet unrealistic deadlines—is generally counterproductive and potentially a source of depression and blocking," sums up the work of Robert Boice. One strategy: Try to limit your working hours, write at a set time each day, and try your best not to emotionally flip out or check email every 20 seconds. This is called "engineering" your environment.

Kellogg is always careful to emphasize the extreme cognitive demands of writing, which is very flattering. "Serious writing is at once a thinking task, a language task, and a memory task," he declares. It requires the same kind of mental effort as a high-level chess match or an expert musical performance. We are all aspiring Mozarts indeed. So what's holding us back? How does one write faster? Kellogg terms the highest level of writing as "knowledge-crafting." In that state, the writer's brain is juggling three things: the actual text, what you plan to say next, and—most crucially—theories of how your imagined readership will interpret what's being written. A highly skilled writer can simultaneously be a writer, editor, and audience.

Since writing is such a cognitively intense task, the key to becoming faster is to develop strategies to make writing literally less mind-blowing. Growing up, we all become speedier writers when our penmanship becomes automatic and we no longer have to think consciously about subject-verb agreement. It's obviously a huge help to write about a subject you know well. In that case, the writer doesn't have to keep all of the facts in her working memory, freeing up more attention for planning and composing.

The modern multitasking style of composing next to an open Internet browser is one solution to limiting writing's cognitive burden. There are experimental programs that will analyze what you are writing and attempt to retrieve relevant definitions, facts, and documents from the Web in case you need them. Like many writers, I take a lot of notes before I compose a first draft. The

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research verifies that taking notes makes writing easier—as long as you don't look at them while you are writing the draft! Doing so causes a writer to jump into reviewing/evaluating mode instead of getting on with the business of getting words on the screen.

Alas, the cognitive literature offers no easy solutions. The same formula appears: "Self-regulation through daily writing, brief work sessions, realistic deadlines, and maintaining low emotional arousal." My old enemy, self-regulation. We meet again.

Kellogg does offer a few takeaway hints for would-be writers. First, if you haven't been writing stories since you were a little kid, give yourself a break since you are actually a "late bloomer." Second, read everything, all the time. That's the only way to build the general knowledge that you can tuck away in long-term memory, only to one day have it magically surface when you're searching for just the right turn of phrase. And, lastly, the trickiest part of writing—from a cognitive perspective—is getting outside of yourself, of seeing your writing through the eyes of others.

Most writers spend their entire careers happily avoiding such an emotional root canal. But not me! I'll read each and every one of your comments. After I go get coffee and a muffin. "Maybe banana nut. [That's a good muffin.](#)"

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**Rebecca Asch**

For any slow, academic writers, I recommend "How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing" by Paul J. Silvia. I've found this book fairly helpful. Several of its suggestions mirror points that Agger included in this article.

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**Carolyn**

Graduate school made me a fast writer.

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**John Yelton**

Always wondered how one of my favorite authors did it: Grace Paley. I heard her called a "genius of brevity," and stand in awe. I write way too much and then edit, reposition, toss out, start over, cry, whine, etc. But I do find that writing on a computer is WAY more productive and of better quality than the days of writing at a typewriter (terrible) or with pen and paper.

Thanks for a great article.

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**randy-khan**

I used to joke that, as a lawyer, what I did was write for a living. Lawyers usually write under time pressure, too. Given the amount of terrible legal writing, this helps demonstrate that many people don't write well when they have to write quickly.

Personally, I've always thought the secret to writing quickly (and well) is to be a good editor. If you can root out the hideous prose and twisted logic in the first draft or the first edit, and if you can avoid obsessing over pointless details (and recognize the difference between a pointless detail and an important nuance), you save an incredible amount of time that other people spend redrafting, re-editing and agonizing over what they did.

Also, omit needless words.

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Liked by  Adriane Skinner



**Will**

Thank you, Michael. I've been a professional writer for seven years and a slow one for 20. This helped me feel less alone. Now, back to that article...

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**Mailman to the Stars**

I class myself a concern pianist of the highest order.

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**ernst lanzer**

Mozart was the speed demon, and Beethoven was the agonizing planner (just look at how many symphonies each one was able to produce...). I think either you or the person you cited has got it wrong.

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**Judy Lin**

I must confess to that same sort of writerly jealousy Agger describes. I'm one of those people who writes something, thinks about it, edits it, writes some more, goes back, decides I don't like the first thing I wrote, deletes it, writes something else, goes back to the end, realizes what I just changed no longer fits...

It really is a miracle that it only takes me about two hours to write a blog post....

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**Ruth Friesen**

I'd love to reprint this article or parts of it in the monthly newsletter of the SouthWest Writers, www.southwestwriters.com. Who do I contact for permission?

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**Jed Rothwell**

There is no need to write quickly. The goal should be to write well. Here is how you do that:

1. You have something important to say.
2. You should be anxious to say it.

If you have nothing important to say, it is better to say nothing. Don't write.

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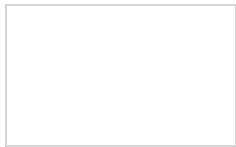
I'd rather say something interesting than important.

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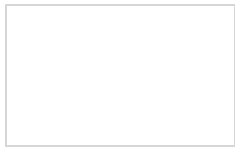
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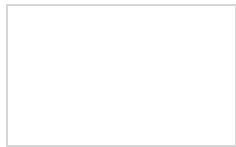
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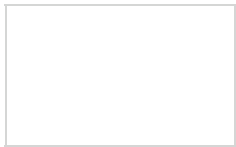
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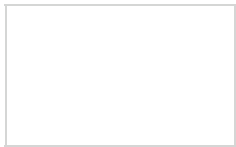
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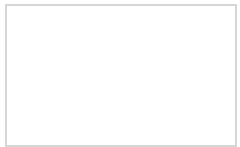
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