9 Ways to Make More Time for Scholarly Writing

By Justin B. Moore, Associate Editor, *JPHMP*

One of the most oft-repeated statements in the academy is "I really should be writing." It has even evolved into a number of humorous memes that you shouldn't search for (since you should be writing). Despite the ubiquity of frustrations over self-sabotage of the writing process, there are a number of productive scholars who successfully produce a robust body of scholarly work. Even if you take away the superhuman, Stephen King-esq scholars, you still have many of our colleagues who are amazingly productive despite having many responsibilities and, dare I say, happy lives outside of work.

While I don't consider myself among the publishing elite, I do feel that I have learned a few things that can help a struggling writer increase productivity. These suggestions are behavioral, environmental, and social by nature but fall neatly into two broad categories: a) avoid time sucks, and b) seek efficiency everywhere. In this Part I, I'll cover "Time Sucks" and cover "Seek Efficiency" in Part II.

Avoiding Time Sucks

What are time sucks? In a broad sense, they're anything that delays your journey to self-actualization (or whatever your goal in life may be); in a narrow sense, they're the things that keep you from writing or harm your scholarly productivity. There are many, but here are a number of common dangers and how to avoid them:

1. **"Friends"** – I'm not suggesting that not having friends helps you to be productive, although it can. But you need to avoid "friends," who can be better characterized as chatty work-related acquaintances or friends of the social media persuasion. If you don't spend time talking or hanging out with someone outside of work, he's not a friend, so it doesn't matter if you give him a "cool story bro" and shut the door on him or walk away. Office politics being what they may, you need to identify those folks at work who want to come by and eat into your writing time, and devise a strategy to avoid/minimize them. Mine is keeping my door shut. I look antisocial; I also look productive. Also, delete all bookmarks, plugins, apps, or anything else that lead to social media. Put your phone across the room. If it rings, you can get up and fetch it.

2. **Unproductive friends** – I'm talking about your real friends who aren't very good at getting things done. You want to keep them socially, you like them, but they never get things done with any predictability or timeliness. I like to say that you'll have two kinds of colleagues in this world, folks you like and folks who get stuff done. You hope that they're the same people, but they're usually not. The good news is that your unproductive friends are not very good at follow-through, so you can keep them from interrupting your life too much by simply not inviting them on projects (or giving them a non-essential task…think cranberry sauce at Thanksgiving), or telling them to do something before you join them on a project of theirs. For example, if a friend says, "We should really write a grant to do this thing! Let's schedule a meeting," you say, "That sounds great. Why don't you write up a specific aims page and send it to me? Once we have that, we'll set up a meeting to discuss." That aims page ain't coming.

3. **The phone** – Keep your cell phone out of arm's reach. I also have a long history of not answering my work phone and not setting up my voicemail. It forces folks to either a) stop calling, or b) email me. Both are good, but the latter lets you respond on your timeline.

4. **Group meetings** – Avoid scheduling a meeting when a call or email will do just fine. Some folks (whom I like to call Meeting Mavens), love to schedule a meeting to talk about scheduling a meeting about meetings. Don't be afraid to counter a meeting request by offering (instead) to write something up and send it out for others to respond to. This may sound counter-intuitive, but why meet for an hour (1.5 hours including travel time) when you can type up something in 45 minutes?

5. **Personal meetings** – Stop scheduling one-hour meetings. Schedule 30-minute meetings but not back to back. That puts a sense of urgency on the attendee but gives you a 30-minute buffer to extend the meeting if necessary.

6. **An unwarranted sense of urgency** – We all have the desire to please others, which often means dropping everything to help people out or meet with them about something. Don't be afraid to push meetings out 2-4 weeks if they're not truly urgent, or ask if the timeline is flexible. Also, don't be afraid to say no if you truly don't have time without digging in to your writing time.

7. **"Working from home"** – I have become really good at legitimately working from home (for specific tasks), but this wasn't always the case. I still don't work well from coffee shops. The trick here is to identify the times and locations that you are productive and schedule your writing time for those locations. In years past, two hours Friday afternoon was a great excuse to go home early so I could write in more comfortable clothes, but it often turned into an hour of

household chores and knocking off early. Know thyself and make rules.

8. **"Service"** – For those in academic positions, service is one of the holy trinities of teaching, service, and research. It is also the least useful in terms of career advancement since a) it's amazingly difficult to evaluate (ie, "Wow, Justin, you did a great job on the Committee on Committees!" said no one ever), and b) it's ubiquitous. By the former, I mean that you can count the number of committees you serve on and the number of grants/papers you review, but that doesn't tell someone the quality of your performance. However, as indicated by the latter, opportunities for service are everywhere. The simple strategy is to say "no" every time someone asks you to do anything. That kind of makes you look like a jerk, but it is amazingly effective unless that person is your boss. A better strategy is to set limits. For example, don't review for a journal that you didn't publish in (unless it's something like *JAMA*…or *JPHMP*), and only agree to as many reviews as you have published papers with them. Also, don't review anything that isn't squarely in your realm of expertise. Simply decline and suggest a colleague who might review (your Meeting Maven friend loves to review papers). For departmental/school/university committees, you'll likely need to serve on one or more, but pick them based upon time commitment and productivity. For example, low-work committees that meet quarterly are good, monthly meeting committees that produce annual reports are bad. Committees that produce finite results and have predictable timelines are good (think admissions), while committees that never seem to end (think curriculum) are bad.

9. **Deviating from the path** – Right up there with "do your job" is "make a plan; work the plan" on the Mount Rushmore of success platitudes. However, they're both grounded in truth and can help you stay on the path to success. While I'll talk about making a plan in Part II, deviating from the plan can be a huge time suck. Deviating from the path means things such as taking on tasks that are not central to your career goals,

which in this case is being a productive scholar. For example, this could be volunteering for a committee because you like the idea, but it's an idea that is peripheral to your scholarly goals. Every time you add something to your plate, you should ask yourself how it relates to your short- and long-term career goals. If you struggle to justify it against that criteria, you shouldn't take it on.

While there are a million other time sucks out there, these are often the most consuming. Next time, we'll cover strategies to maximize efficiency, which will hopefully help you optimize the time that you've made available by avoiding time sucks.

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