

Writing during the Impossible: Tips for writing from an academic and mother

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My writing habits have changed dramatically as my personal circumstances have changed. Starting as an undergraduate in anthropology and well into my PhD, and as much as I always promised myself not to do it, I would descend into an altered state when working to meet a writing deadline: “In the act of writing, as in spirit possession, sexual ecstasy, or spiritual bliss, we are momentarily out of our minds... We shape shift... We stretch the limits of what is humanly possible” (Jackson, 2013, p.3). I prefer cleanliness, but as I delved deeper into a writing project, my house would become a mess and I would stop showering, and as time crept closer to the deadline, I would even stop changing into pajamas, instead sleeping for just a few hours and returning to writing wearing the same clothes for days. I remember rolling over and picking up my laptop and books from beside me on the bed to start writing again. I would run out of healthy food and would stop cooking and start eating take-out during the day and chocolate and candies at night. All other things in my life would stop and I would be fully inside my ‘writing cave,’ only returning to normal life once the paper was submitted.

Then, when I was nearing the end of my doctoral fieldwork, I got pregnant and was due just when I had planned to return home to start analysing and writing. This meant I would be writing my dissertation while caring for a newborn. Several senior anthropologists at a conference told me to write as much as possible while the baby was small and still slept a lot, before s/he started walking and tearing the house apart. I did manage to write when the baby was small, but on my due date, my husband had a serious accident. He fell off a roof and, though lucky to be

alive, he shattered his calcaneus, and was waiting for surgery when I went into labour. I ended up with an emergency caesarean section and could not drive or lift anything for months while my husband was in and out of the hospital and could not put weight on his foot for over six months. Clearly, I could not do as much writing as before. In time, though, I started to get enough sleep again and could write when our baby was sleeping or playing. This meant I had to pace myself, though; my writing cave now had other occupants. Now I had to sleep and shower and eat real food. More importantly, I had to respond to my child who was always around me. I had to learn to write in short and effective segments, which was new to me, but it started to work. I was on the way to finding my writing groove when my child was just over a year old. With most chapters of my dissertation composed, I was working on its structure when I suddenly found myself cleaning out a closet at 11:00 pm. That was weird. Then I started to feel funny. I was unexpectedly pregnant.

I was in my late 30s, so I accepted this surprise as a blessing, but I was suddenly under immense pressure to complete my dissertation. I was exhausted and felt nausea all of the time. I could no longer sit up at night once the baby was in bed and write for 3 to 4 hours at a time. I did not want to take another maternity leave from my PhD, partly because there is no employment insurance maternity leave for doctoral students in Canada. I also did not want my PhD to last another year. I wanted to apply for my current position as Assistant Professor in Anthropology at Athabasca University and needed to have a defence date in order to do that. The bureaucratic nightmare of scheduling a defence within a short time and before academic summer research leaves made that nearly impossible, but I decided to finish before our second baby arrived, and I miraculously did. I have to admit, when I officially submitted my final draft, I ordered a pizza, got into the bathtub and cried while I ate it.

I am not recommending that graduate students follow my personal hurricane of PhD completion. But what I do want to share are some of the things I was forced to learn about writing in this time of madness, because we are always going to face challenges during the writing process, and if we want to share our work and talents with the world, and continue as academics, we need to write. I also love to write and want to find ways to make it happen while I have two toddlers in the house. In fact, I think that writing during times when it has felt impossible, like in pregnancy

and with small children, has made me a more skilled and effective academic writer than I was before. That said, the societal challenges we face now seem to make writing more vital but also more stressful. Aside from working as a mother and academic during the pandemic with childcare not easily available, bigger problems loom. These are uneasy times (see Pandian, 2019), with the issues of climate change, related ecological pressure and crises, and increasing political divides, which make it feel like it is impossible to find the energy to write. The paradox of course is that it is more important than ever to write and share one's unique perspective to contribute to new ways of thinking and real solutions. Below I list and describe some of the writing habits and tools I have learned over the years with the hope that they will encourage others to write through these impossible times too.

Start Small

I used to be really afraid of scrutiny and judgement of my writing. I found that blogging or writing short pieces for a friendly or casual reading audience helped me build confidence to write for professors I admired or for peer-reviewed publications.

Write In The Moments

I previously focussed for days on the same project without any gaps for useful reflection. I wasted a lot of time while in my writing cave doing things like checking e-mail, staring at my split ends, or checking Facebook over and over even when I didn't want to. I wasn't using my time effectively. We need time to pause and think about our writing, and I found that my best thoughts came in the shower or while out for a walk. My point is that short, but effective writing spurts can result in major gains in word counts, that is, if I wasn't distracting myself with activities that didn't lead to useful reflective gaps. You don't have to spend all day staring at your computer; a half hour or a few hours of writing can be just as productive as a whole day, that is, if you shift between tasks that enhance reflection.

Shift Tasks

When I get stuck on something, I can change tasks and still get something accomplished. This can mean working on a different writing assignment, or writing a different section of a piece I'm

working on, or reading references, or editing etc. As long as I'm working on something on my writing to-do list when I need to be writing, it is an accomplishment.

Ask For Help

Something has to give when you're a busy academic and a parent. Sometimes we need childcare or someone to cook or clean up. Sometimes, if we can find the funds, it is worth hiring a professional. I was lucky to have a friend who is a professional editor and I hired her to help me with the copy editing of my dissertation. It is important to have a friendly and skilled person who will read your work before it is submitted to someone whose job it is to read critically. There is no shame in asking for help.

Take Baby Steps (Little By Little)

Anne Lamott's book "Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life" (1994) is an enjoyable and helpful read, but I find a great deal of value right in its metaphorical title. It refers to her brother's school assignment on birds that he left until the weekend before it was due, causing him great anxiety. Their professional writer father told him, "Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird" (Lamott, 1994, p.19). He meant write about one bird at a time, rather than getting overwhelmed by thinking about all of the birds at once. Any time I feel overwhelmed by something, I give myself this advice. We accomplish large tasks by doing a lot of small ones over time.

When I caught myself checking Facebook even when I did not want to, I decided it was time to stop using social media. I did not make grandiose announcements that I then had to check for "likes," rather, I just signed out of everything and removed the apps from my phone. I thought it would take a week or two to notice positive effects on my writing and concentration, but it literally took no more than a day. My mind cleared, I could focus on what I was reading, and my writing improved. I was no longer thinking in hashtags.

Celebrate

Now, you do not have to be as extravagant as eating pizza in the bathtub, but it is important to celebrate your successes. Stephen Wyatt, a professor of Forestry at the Université de Moncton, who I worked for as a research assistant during my PhD, told me that every time he submits a draft, he plays Queen's song "Another one bites the dust." Please find something special you can do for yourself and celebrate your submissions, so that you are motivated by positive rewards.

Be Kind To Yourself

Ironically, I submitted this piece of writing a week late. I had started writing and then scheduled a day to complete writing this before the deadline and my phone rang in the middle of the night. My dear, sweet friend Dr. Justin Nolan, an ethnobotanist and professor of anthropology, passed away. At first, I thought I would immerse myself in my writing as a way of coping, but the grief overwhelmed and exhausted me. It took me almost a week before I had enough energy to begin writing again. Sometimes we need breaks and we need to be kind to ourselves. When I am overtired, negative self-talk and self-doubt creep in and it seems then that I cannot form a complete sentence. Writing in this state is a really bad idea.

I take my friend Justin's tragic passing as a reminder that sharing creative thought with the world is a lot more important than other ways we spend our time doing tasks we classify as "work." When we write we share a part of ourselves, our stories, and the stories of the people around us. Writing, to me, is a large part of what makes us human, and in the Shakespearian sense, it makes us immortal. After Justin died, I went to my office and pulled down his book "Wild Harvest in the Heartland: Ethnobotany in Missouri's Little Dixie" (2007) just to feel a little closer to him. When I read books by people I've met, I hear their voice as I read. In his Arkansas accent, Justin tells me, "The pathway to discovery originates right here, right now, in this very time and place, in the fields, forests, and outdoor habitats that have sustained our species since the beginning" (2007, p.v). Just as life gives us excuses to not write, it gives us many more reasons to write. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us are trying to work and write with children at home, or in stressful

and unusual circumstances, but with a few adjustments to your writing habits, I hope that you will be able to write during these seemingly impossible times.

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