

Book Review: Write to the Top! How to Become a Prolific Academic

Dorian Stoilescu
University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada

dorian.stoilescu@utoronto.ca

Johnson and Mullen's (2007) *Write to the Top* reveals important insights into academic apprenticeship by presenting daily but essential aspects of living, working, and thinking as a university scholar. Discussing 65 distinct topics organized into 11 chapters, this academic guide initiates new scholars into the phenomenology of academic writing, not by presenting formal rules, but rather by helping readers understand the beauty of scholarship and the constraints and liberties of working in higher education. As the authors make crystal clear from the outset, academic writing does not constitute the only aspect of an academic's life; however, these writing skills are essential to surviving in higher education. Without outstanding writing skills, life in research-oriented universities becomes a nightmare.

Once acknowledging their major career goals, newcomers who decide to enter academia must clearly establish their priorities in order to build a solid career. The book does not advise a prospective academic writer to quit other obligations such as family, teaching, service, or athletic practices. According to the authors, these obligations may be put off in the short term, but a prolific author must avoid single-mindedness in order to achieve long term career goals. Yet, progress in academic writing is not guaranteed as a linear progression. As Boice (1990) cautioned in his book *Professors as writers: A self-guide to productive writing*, the pace in scholarly writing is not something easy to keep; traversing a path from an external decision to internalization is an arduous process, but one essential to fostering substantial contributions in scholarly writing.

In order to reach a high academic level, this book advises building an efficient personal schedule and keeping the focus on writing as the path to achieving successful scholarship. The authors urge readers to find a way of taking control of their daily schedule. One of the most useful topics in this book is the focus on the relentless pursuit of achieving excellence, where "productivity [is viewed] as a professional privilege" (p.60). Johnson and Mullen present academic writing as a negotiation of space and spiritual energy among personal rhythms of writing, social obligations, and life events. Excellence in academic writing should be considered as a long term commitment. An important issue addressed in this book is the relationship between quality and quantity in academic writings. Although criteria for evaluating faculty achievements value quality, quantity counts also. In this vein, this book mentors prospective scholars by showing attitudes and perspectives that prolific scholars should adopt: "Write to thrive, not merely to survive" (p.62).

Material published as part of this publication, either on-line or in print, is copyrighted by the Informing Science Institute. Permission to make digital or paper copy of part or all of these works for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that the copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage AND that copies 1) bear this notice in full and 2) give the full citation on the first page. It is permissible to abstract these works so long as credit is given. To copy in all other cases or to republish or to post on a server or to redistribute to lists requires specific permission and payment of a fee. Contact Publisher@InformingScience.org to request redistribution permission.

Although criteria for evaluating faculty achievements value quality, quantity counts also. In this vein, this book mentors prospective scholars by showing attitudes and perspectives that prolific scholars should adopt: "Write to thrive, not merely to survive" (p.62).

Frequently occurring issues in academic writing and strengths that scholars need

in order to be successful writers are discussed extensively in this guide. Two of the issues mentioned that often confront people in academia are procrastination and perfectionism. Procrastination, or avoidance of starting or completing a decision or a task, is viewed as a “form of negative inertia” for academic writing (p. 149). Also, the occurrence of perfectionism frequently takes place, as it is often confused with academic excellence. Perfectionism is viewed as “rooted in irrational belief – most often demands for superhuman performance. Perfectionistic demands inhibit productivity” (p.118). In contrast, self-control, patience, and persistence are qualities mentioned as being essential for achieving writing performance: “doggedness, perseverance, and tenacity are characteristics of nearly all great writers” (p.67). Also, dealing with rejections in the publishing process is essential, as all authors are inevitably confronted with this rejection at a certain point.

This academic guide considers cultivating mentorships of major importance in fostering scholarship. Social networking is essential, as human capital is a decisive factor that might foster or undermine creativity. Therefore, in academic decisions, human capital should trump financial capital: “New faculty overemphasize the value of economic capital while underestimating that of human capital. We are so focused on salaries and start-up funds that we forget to consider the availability of willing mentors” (p.141). Having adequate mentors is seen as an important factor that helps in fostering good academic practices and ethics. Having said that, Johnson and Mullen do not consider mentorship as mandatory as long as new scholars have proven successful by performing alone: “Some people do not seek senior faculty, writing experts or peers. There is no shame in writing alone” (p. 144). On the other hand, writing alone as a permanent habit might diminish their prolificacy and narrow the writer’s perspectives: “Finally, the exclusively solo writer might miss out on opportunities for accelerating productivity through collaborative projects and writing teams” (p. 144). Along this line, the authors suggest seeking out suitable coauthors and collaborators.

An important part of the book prepares authors to understand the process of writing and submitting for peer-reviewed journals, grants, and books. Some suggested models of interaction with editors and various committees are also presented. Importantly, the authors share some professional advice to help new scholars target their manuscripts to a specific journal or publisher. First of all, writing should be programmatic; authors should first find a niche or gap and fill it with their own publications and reports. Further, academics are advised to take into consideration various forms of experience that the university environment offers: “Where relevant and appropriate, import the insights gained from your research, teaching and service activities into your writing” (p.178). Advice for applying for different grants and sponsorships can be best summarized by the following, “Be your best sponsor: Promote your quality work for award considerations, especially at the national level but also the state and local levels” (p. 121).

Histories of writing difficulties and professional issues encountered by academics are portrayed by Johnson and Mullen. Cases of being pressured to succeed, writing marathons, and sleep deprivation situations are discussed thoroughly. Personal lifestyle choices such as keeping an unhealthy diet, drinking caffeine to avoid sleepiness, and taking inhibitors such as alcoholic drinks are briefly discussed by presenting their complex effects for academic life. Academics are encouraged to practice self-care so that writing is not being achieved to the detriment of their health. In this sense, writing should be deeply rooted in the act of living. Therefore, according to the authors, an important aspect for academics in the writing marathon remains dealing with their own health. The final section gives the perspective of writing as a philosophy and way of life. “Eating, talking, exercising, travelling, showering, and even dreaming can all provide excellent opportunities for coaching yourself in writing” (p.140).

This book is not based on erudition, methodical investigations, or literature review about academic writing; rather it builds with intense passion on the authors’ deep personal experience and

abnegation for scholarship. Together with Becker (2007) and Silvia (2007), this book offers sound guidance about writing for new academics in humanities and social science. Although the primary purpose of this book was to be a guide for professors looking for tenure, I recommend a thorough reading also, for any graduate students who are considering an academic career at research institutes.

References

- Becker, H. S. (2007). *Writing for social scientists: How to start and finish your thesis, book or article*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press
- Boice, R. (1990). *Professors as writers: A self-guide to productive writing*. Stillwater, Oklahoma: New Forums Press.
- Johnson, W. B. & Mullen, C. A. (2007). *Write to the top! How to become a prolific academic*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Silvia, P. J. (2007). *How to write a lot: A practical guide to productive academic writing*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

Biography



Dorian Stoilescu is a doctoral student in Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education from the University of Toronto. His research interests include educational technology, teacher education, and mathematics education.