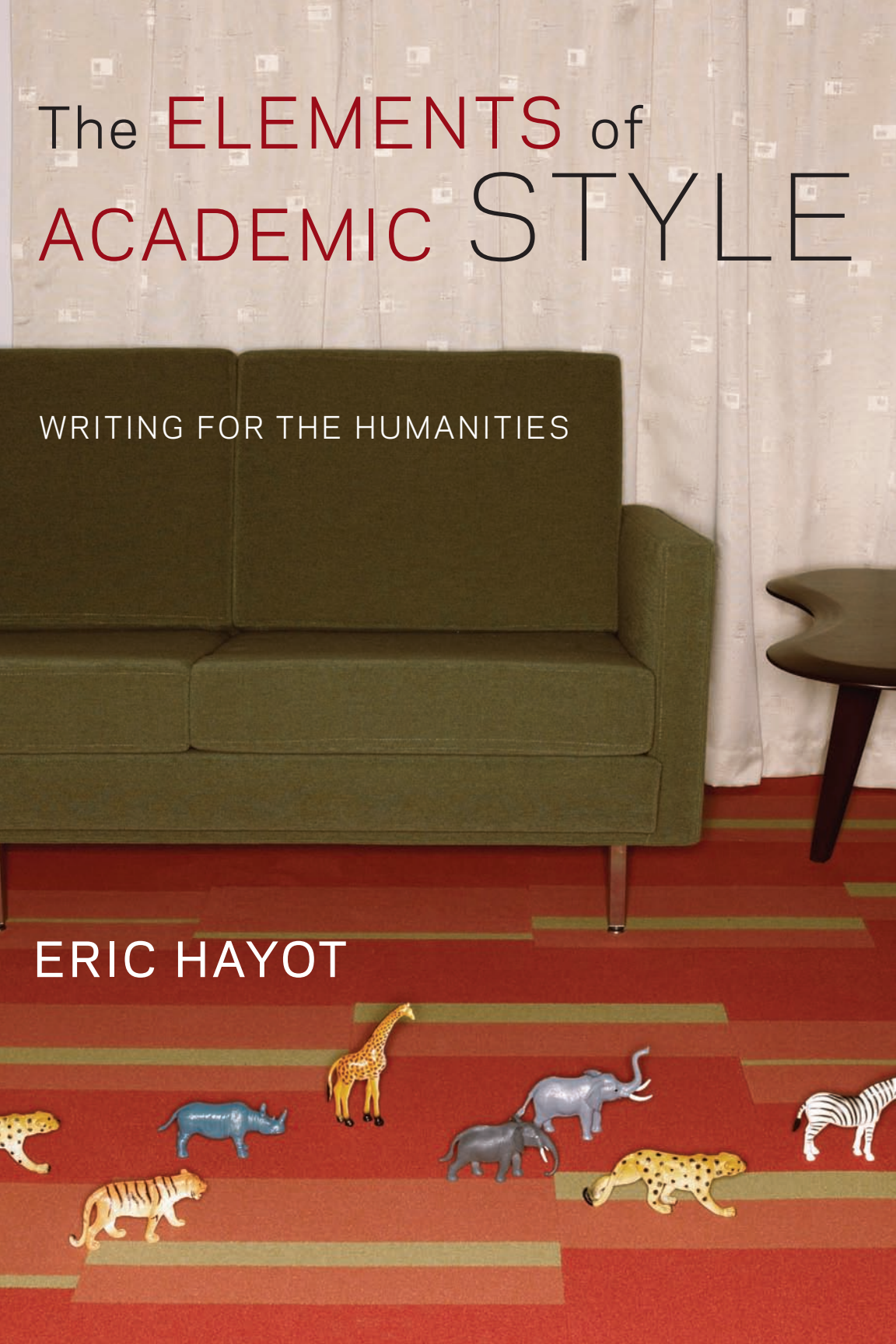
The ELEMENTS of ACADEMIC STYLE

WRITING FOR THE HUMANITIES

ERIC HAYOT



The Elements of Academic Style

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Eric Hayot



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The Elements of Academic Style

One

Why Read This Book?

Writing is not the memorialization of ideas. Writing distills, crafts, and pressure-tests ideas—it *creates* ideas. Active, engaged writing makes works from words. And these works belong, in turn, to the means that made them. They emerge from a process; they represent their becoming, and that emergence, in their final form.

Writing is, therefore, a kind of learning. I say so to oppose writing to dictation, to a conception of writing as a necessary but tedious step in the distribution and fixation of ideas. Conceiving of writing as the process whereby you put down thoughts you already have will give you a bad theory of what writing does and can do. As an idea of writing's purpose, it tends to make for mediocre writers and mediocre prose. Writing as though you already know what you have to say hinders it as a medium for research and discovery; it blocks the possibilities—the openings—that appear at the intersection of an intention and an audience, and constitute themselves, there, as a larger, complete performance. Active writing should not involve saying things you already understand and know, but instead let you think new things. And that is why, this book will argue, you cannot know what your ideas are, mean, or do until you set them down in sentences, whether on paper or on screen. It is also why the essay or the book you write will not be, if you are open and generous and unafraid, the essay or book you started with. To understand that process as a good thing and to develop a writing practice that helps you inhabit it: those are the two projects of this book.

WHY READ THIS BOOK?

Why read this book instead of any other book about academic writing? To answer that question, let's look at the three major types of books of this type that scholars in literary studies might be tempted to read:

1. *Books addressing nonfiction style, especially at the level of the paragraph and the sentence, though often including a general ethos of writing as well.* This category, the largest of the three, includes Strunk and White's famous *Elements of Style*, Jacques Barzun's *Simple and Direct*, Arthur Plotnik's *Spunk & Bite*, Roy Peter Clark's *Writing Tools*, William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*, and Joseph Williams's *Style*. Most of these books assume a college-educated audience; almost all focus heavily on semi-journalistic forms like the magazine essay. None of them address scholarly writing at all. The exceptions are Helen Sword's recently published *Stylish Academic Writing*, whose focus on major features of nonfictional style (storytelling, sentencing, jargon, etc.) draws from examples from across the academic disciplines, from the humanities to the hard sciences, and Michael Billig's *Learn to Write Badly*, which deals almost exclusively with academic writing in the social sciences.

2. *Books focused on the psychological and working structures that help people write*. Some of these are for lay audiences and undergraduate students, including Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* and Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*. Others focus specifically on the kinds of problems the academic professoriate faces, such as Robert Boice's *Professors as Writers,* Paul Silvia's *How to Write a Lot*, and Joan Bolker's *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day* (a sentence from the introduction of that book: "I don't actually know anyone who's [written a dissertation] in only fifteen minutes a day.").

3. *Books that cover the formal patterns and structure necessary to produce specific academic genres*. Books like William Germano's *From Dissertation to Book* or *The Thesis and the Book*, edited by Eleanor Harman and her colleagues, follow this format. In this category you will also find something like Wendy Belcher's excellent *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks*, which includes advice about work patterns alongside its highly detailed analysis about the journal article as a genre.

The Elements of Academic Style covers ground from all three of these areas. The first part of the book, "Writing as Practice," frames the discussion

of academic style by talking about how writing is currently taught (implicitly and explicitly) in graduate school. It goes on to offer advice about psychological and social structures designed to promote writing and looks at the institutional contexts that govern the major genres in humanistic style (mainly the kind of thing that appears in books of the second and third type). I also present an ethos of writing—a way of thinking about what writing does, and how it should work—that aims to help you understand *why* you might write a certain way, or why I recommend certain structural strategies or sentence-level choices. Together, these pieces of advice guide you toward an understanding of writing as an extensively lived practice governed by (and governing in turn) a wide variety of behaviors, attitudes, institutional patterns, and personal and social regimes.

The book's second part, "Strategy," examines large-scale structures that govern the production of scholarship in literary and cultural studies, including introductions, conclusions, structural rhythm, transitions, and so on. The third part, "Tactics," covers lower-level aspects of writing practice: footnotes, figurative language, diction, ventilation, and a variety of other concepts that usually operate below the level of a writer's conscious activity. I know of no other book that gives this kind of detailed guidance for scholarly writers in the humanities (Helen Sword's book comes closest, but flies at a higher altitude). It's in the detailed, writing instruction about scholarship—breaking down the "Uneven U" paragraph, demonstrating how to "show your iceberg," laying out a continuum of metadiscursive practice, or working through three major types of transitions, all of these specifically focused on scholarship in literary and cultural studies—that this book offers things you can't find anywhere else.

The Elements of Academic Style is mostly written for scholars in literary and cultural studies, whether graduate students or members of the faculty. At its most particular, it is a book about how to write "theory," or rather, how to write literary scholarship in the mode that was born out of the influence of philosophy and cultural studies on literary criticism over the last three decades. I make no guarantees as to its general applicability! Might these lessons only work for someone with my idiosyncratic educational trajectory; my Continental, soupless childhood; or my suspiciously comedic history of psychological disasters? Perhaps. But perhaps again you and I share, happily, a history of psychological disasters. In which case what works for me may well work, *mutatis mutandis*, for you as well.

I do think that, regardless of who you are, many of the lessons here are abstractable for general use. Readers outside the literature Ph.D. sweet spot—interested undergraduates and amateurs, or professional historians and philosophers of all stripes—will undoubtedly find lessons to take home, if they are willing to account on their own dime for field-specific differences in style. Because in the long run I don't care whether you write just like me. I care whether you write just like you—that you come to scholarly prose with both purpose and intention, that you take it seriously as a craft, that you understand how and why you do what you do, that you strive to do more than reproduce the stylistic average of your age and experience. And that you follow, in the long run, the path that you make.

This is a book for finding your way.

Part I

Writing as Practice

Two

Unlearning What You (Probably) Know

Why write a book on scholarly writing for graduate students and faculty in the humanities? Partly because no such book exists.

Other volumes, most famously Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, cover aspects of writing essayistic nonfiction style at the sentence level. Even fewer cover structure; Joseph M. Williams's *Style* stands out in that arena. Fewer still focus specifically on academic style, and those that do tend to cover broad swaths of the social sciences and humanities, and even, like Helen Sword's *Stylish Academic Writing*, the sciences as well. A number of books help with psychology and time management; still others are geared toward making dissertations into books. All are useful, yet all aim broader, narrower, or to the side of what this book wants to do. What's more, some of these books are written by people who seem to be jerks, or at least are perfectly happy to take on that role in prose. Being the ideal reader of Jacques Barzun's *Simple & Direct*, for instance, entails reading a sentence like "we are forced to notice our contemporaries' fumbling purpose in the choice and manufacture of words" and feeling like you want to belong to that "we." I don't. Writing is hard, and it gives me little pleasure to feel contempt for those who don't do it well. I'm among them often enough.

But the main reason to write for faculty and students in literature is to counteract the current state of writing instruction in graduate programs. Mostly such instruction doesn't happen at all. This is startling when you consider that writing well in two or three major professional forms—the

conference paper, the twenty-five- to thirty-five-page journal article or longer book chapter, and the complete book—is one of the most important things you should know how to do, and how to do well, as an academic. It is more startling to realize that even when writing is taught—and it is, though usually unconsciously and implicitly—what little instruction that does happen doesn't actually teach students how to write in those important professional formats, instead often inculcating habits that make it more difficult to write well in them. All in all, much of what graduate school teaches about writing and writing practice makes things harder and worse.

Let me explain. Many writing assignments given in graduate courses in literary and cultural studies (and in their upper-level undergraduate cousins) involve asking students to write an end-of-term essay, usually twenty to thirty pages in length, that connects thematically to the course material. Students usually conceive of and write these essays in the final three to four weeks of the semester. All of these essays receive grades, but only a small subset of them ever gets marked up and commented on. (Many are simply never seen again.) If you are a student like I was, you will, after reading the professor's comments, put the essay away and never think about it again. The new semester follows; you have new reading and work to do; summer teaching begins; or you have to study for your comprehensive exams.

Yet everything we know about writing tells us that lessons about style, structure, and argument don't take without commentary or revision. In fact, if you've been a graduate student in English, you've spent quite a bit of time trying to convince recalcitrant undergraduates to believe and practice that very thing. So why does the vast majority of graduate education in U.S. programs in literature happen without extensive discussion of writing, or any active, institutionally structured revision?

Let us recognize the exceptions. Many professors do bring writing instruction into the classroom, and a number of graduate programs have a course dedicated specifically to writing practice. A friend of mine speaks of a wonderful intro-to-grad-school class (his was taught by taught by Sam Otter, at UC Berkeley, in English), where students wrote a critical review of scholarship, an argumentative essay, and a final ten- to fifteen-page work of literary criticism. Another colleague at the University of Arizona

some years ago had students produce an abstract, a conference paper, and a final essay, with one assignment leading into the other as a way of showing students how to carve a developmental path through professional forms. (He then set up a mini-conference for his students, so that they could practice giving conference papers—extra work for him, but how generous and serious!) And so on. There are good people, trying hard, almost everywhere, in the cause of good writing.

My argument here is, accordingly, with the *institutional* patterns, not the individual faculty. That's because, though I hope that every student gets to study with a faculty member who teaches writing well, I know that the sheer luck of the draw (or the necessity of choosing an advisor in your field) will in many cases mean that students get almost no writing instruction at all. (Even if, as a faculty member, you are one of the "good guys," ask yourself: to what degree has your graduate faculty ever had serious discussions about the institutional patterns of teaching writing, or asked how your program could better integrate the teaching of writing in professionally normative forms into the intellectual and professional development of your students? To what degree have you been willing to subordinate the pedagogical choices of any single faculty member to some institutional or developmental logic that you have discussed together and allowed to become part of the nature of your graduate program?) The problem is structural rather than personal. It has to do with the relationship between the entire pattern of graduate-level pedagogy on one hand, and professional life after graduate school on the other.

To understand this more clearly let's look at one specific instance of that overall pattern: the seminar paper. What, we might ask, does the seminar paper teach?

Let's start answering this question by concentrating on what the seminar paper teaches as a matter of writing *practice*, asking what kinds of behavior it trains graduate students to do. It's perhaps easiest to begin by noticing that the patterns and practices of the seminar paper bear no resemblance to the ways professors write. No one I know writes publishable essays in three weeks, much less when simultaneously working on one or two other essays over the same time period. Most of us write a single essay over the course of a steady, longer period of work—a summer,

a semester, or a year—while engaging in extensive periods of research and rewriting. During this time we will often present pieces of this larger work at conferences, share portions with friends and colleagues, or pass some of our ideas through our teaching, using the feedback from those arenas to refine and focus concepts and intuitions or to find new directions and patterns of thought. Once complete, essays submitted to journals always go through periods of more or less serious revision in response to anonymous or editorial review or to suggestions made by copyeditors. The process of publishing an essay in a journal or book rarely takes less than a year from start to finish and usually involves a complex and iterative series of thinking, writing, and revision.

Note the differences between this drawn-out practice and that of the seminar paper. The way things work now, a visitor from Mars might reasonably guess that the purpose of the first two or three years of graduate coursework is to train students in a writing practice designed to generate seventy-five pages or so over three to four weeks. Which would be great if that were what the profession actually asked for. Since it's not, you would minimally want some assurance from someone that the frequent training in this particular skill—writing seventy-five pages over three weeks—actually helps prepare graduate students for the kinds of work they will be asked to do when they begin writing their dissertations.

The most obvious assurance I can think of would claim that the value of the seminar paper is that it acts as a "junior," or "practice," article—it's about the same length as an article, is written in sentences and paragraphs, makes an argument, uses evidence, and so on. Such a response usefully allows us to see some of the specific virtues of the seminar paper, namely that it can teach students to organize and manage an argument of an appropriate length; that it helps give students a intuitive sense of the shape of a twenty-five-page idea; and that it requires them (usually) to manage both primary and secondary sources. Fair enough.

But seminar papers differ from articles or book chapters in some important ways. Because they are written in three or so weeks, seminar papers tend to have far less research in them than in publishable articles. This means that they're not very densely citational, rarely use narrative footnotes, and cannot address existing professional debates in a significant way. Also, since they're written in a hurry, they are likely to have

horizontal (paratactic) rather than subordinating (hypotactic) structures, in which one simply says the next big thing one can think of while trying desperately to get to the minimum page length requirement. For similar reasons, seminar papers usually involve close readings of two to three texts in the course, and their intellectual center often lies somewhere in the set of questions and texts organized by the course's professor. Reviewers who encounter such essays as journal submissions recognize them immediately because the basic question they address has an unspoken justification in the logic of the course for which the paper was originally written, about which the essays themselves cannot, of course, speak. The result is that even very good seminar papers need a summer or semester of work to approach the form and structure necessary to get published.

There may be, then, some good reasons to occasionally assign seminar papers, but they do not justify assigning them in every class. There's actually quite a bit to learn about academic writing that the seminar paper cannot really teach. Consider a list of the things you will need to learn to write publishable (and interesting) articles and books:

Psychology and Ethos

1. To adapt to the rhythms and psychological pressures of how professors work.
2. To develop a repertoire of habits that make writing possible.
3. To construct an ethos of writing as a form of social practice (to know *why* you write).

Format and Structure

4. To clearly understand the standard formats of academic style (the conference paper, the article, and the book) and the differences among them.
5. To know, for each format, the various stylistic and structural options governing argumentative and scholarly logic (introductions, conclusions, etc.).
6. To have a sense of the different ways of using evidence, and to know how those ways create a comprehensive citational practice.

Discourse and Metadiscourse

7. To deploy paratextual and metadiscursive language to frame and organize an argument or arguments.
8. To have a basic sense of the sentence- and paragraph-level effects of grammar, diction, figural language, and other aspects of style.
9. To understand how all these aspects of writing come together to create an intellectual or writerly style; to make one's own style.

The seminar paper teaches some aspects (such as skills 4 and 5), and may involve practice in skills 6, 7, and 8. These successes are mitigated, however, by the fact that it *un*-teaches the first skill and can do a good deal of damage when it comes to skills 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

How so? Well, the speed at which the seminar paper is written means that you get some practice in putting together sentences and paragraphs (skill 5) and will have to use quotations and other forms of evidence (skill 6). But because the paper is long, both you and your professor will understand its major value as stemming from the validity and clarity of its argument as a whole, so the sentences and paragraphs will matter less, relatively speaking, than they would in a one-page assignment. As a result seminar papers do not draw your attention to the basic formal patterns that compose academic style; instead, they suggest that the writing is the thing you pass through on your way to the real ideas. (But the professor can't focus on students' sentences because the seminar papers are written so quickly that allowances must be made for awkwardness of style! Exactly.) Similarly, comparing any seminar paper to any published article will show you that the latter cites far more densely and has more footnotes than the former. What you learn while writing seminar papers, though correct for any single citation, is wrong for citational practice as a whole. At the macro, structural level, the seminar paper has you repeatedly practice a style of citation and notation that is professionally *wrong*.

A problem like this is solvable, even within the semester constraint. You can start by asking yourself, what do I need to learn how to do to write successful articles and books? Among other things you will need to learn to cite and footnote appropriately. I have recently begun asking my students to practice this task by having them write final papers with citational densities approaching those of published articles. Since they

don't have time to do the concrete research it would take to fill their work with real notes, I simply have them make the quotations and citations up. (Seriously. I just have them invent the quotations, allowing them to practice using them at the right moment; to learn how to transition in and out of block or full-sentence quotes, or in-line citations; to manage agreement and disagreement with sources; and to handle different theoretical, historical, or critical supports.) Simultaneously, I ask students to identify three or four kinds of notes that academics commonly use, and require them to use at least one of each type in their papers. Voila! They're practicing appropriate citational structure. Not exactly how the pros do it, but close enough for *practice*. Just as professional basketball players don't train by exclusively playing five-on-five games, or concert violinists by only playing full scores, academics don't have to improve at writing articles only by writing articles. Writing a good article requires a number of different skills, only one of which is learning to manage a twenty-five-page idea. Graduate school should give you the opportunity to learn them all.

The point here is not that all seminar papers should require their writers to practice citational density. Sometimes you want a paper to focus on close reading a single text; at others you might want to practice integrating historical research with literary material. Different kinds of writing assignments teach different kinds of things. A good, coherent education ought to train graduate students in the wide spectrum of skills necessary to produce scholarly articles and books, which means that it should include a variety of writing assignments, that it should involve metadiscourse about the forms and practices of writing that allow students to put those assignments together in some larger picture of professional and writerly development, and that it should be understood as an overarching process whose responsibility is the faculty's and the department's as a whole.

Such a process begins with two simple questions: What do faculty need to teach Ph.D. students in literature to *do?* What, that is, are the specific forms of professional practice that will allow students to succeed as writers and scholars?

These are mainly the dissertation, the journal article, and the book.

And how much time do students spend practicing or leaning how to write journal articles or dissertations in graduate school? Not very much—especially during the first two to three "coursework" years. What would it take to prepare students to work in those genres, not simply as a matter

of format, but as a matter of writing practice? How do you teach people accustomed to short-term writing assignments to develop the psychological and behavioral patterns needed to produce an article or a dissertation?

Let's remember some basic things about the dissertation. It has no deadlines. It will not be written in three weeks. Dissertation chapters stem from weeks to months of intense research, followed by months (or years) of writing. Instead of being judged relative to other seminar papers ("This is good, for something written in three weeks!"), dissertations are judged relative to published scholarship, altering expected standards for citation, structure, and novelty ("This is good, relative to important published work on the subject."). And instead of being done when the deadline comes, dissertations are finished when they're deemed good enough. Writing a dissertation thus presents a set of very particular psychological and professional challenges. Much of the struggle my students have when dissertating, especially with their first chapters, does not come from having to master unfamiliar subject material but from having to learn to write, and to think about writing, in a completely new way.

How could you modify the first years of graduate school to prepare students for that challenge? Here we run into some practical obstacles. We can't start first-year students out writing journal articles because they don't know enough yet, and because such articles themselves take too long to write and hence don't fit in a single semester. Fair enough. But what if students in their second or third year were required to do a year-long independent study whose outcome was a publishable essay? (That standard is a requirement of the comprehensive exam in the political science Ph.D. program at Duke University and of the M.A. program in English at Penn State University.) Or what if we delayed the start of the spring semester courses by two weeks, thereby creating a "revision" period in which students rework one of their seminar papers from the previous fall, or put together a précis describing how they would turn that paper into a publishable article?

Some places are already thinking about this as they attempt to cope with the problems caused by the dominance of seminar paper requirements. Recently the Department of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages at Stanford University decided that too many of its students were struggling with three end-of-quarter seminar papers, which resulted in too

many incompletes and too many summers spent making them up. As a result, for 2012–2013 year the department offered students and faculty a chance to experiment with a new format. Students, in consultation with their advisors, chose one of their three classes for which to write a longer assignment and did shorter writing assignments in the other two.

We can push this idea farther. Imagine that the faculty in a Ph.D. program would identify three pedagogically useful formats for producing writing in a semester-length course: the seminar paper (designed to maximize the student's opportunity to think of a twenty-five-page idea); a series of short papers (designed to maximize critical reading practices, paragraphing, or style at the sentence level); and the "excerpt," a ten-page piece of writing that would imagine itself as a piece of a fully publishable article (designed to maximize citational learning, dealing with scholarship, and structure). Then imagine that, in each semester, students (in consultation with their advisors and with the thematic opportunities of their courses in mind) would assign each format to one of their courses. Outside the regular classroom, the department would then offer special sessions over the course of the year that would describe and teach the three genres, with discussions of how they correspond to pedagogical goals and how they prepare students for professional-level writing. These sessions might involve handing out successful examples in the various genres, workshopping student work, or analyzing the patterns and structures of the major professional types of writing that the formats teach. Now think about the difference between the average level of thought and institutional awareness surrounding professional writing in such a department, and the one that obtains in most departments now.

No one knows whether such an experiment, or the new process at Stanford, will produce better writing in the long run; in fact the Stanford experiment seems to be less about writing than about avoiding incompletes. I describe them here because they show how the institutional structure of graduate education communicates a theory of writing and teaches a set of habits involving writing practice, and because they open the door to thinking in a more holistic way about what writing is and how it is taught.

More practically, I am trying to help you understand—if you have not yet started your dissertation—how you might even now begin thinking

about preparing yourself for that challenge. You do not need to wait for your graduate program to change. You can always take on an independent study with a professor in your field, or get together with a group of friends to create a writing group. Minimally you need to be thinking of yourself as someone who is moving beyond a highly familiar genre and mode of practice—the end-of-term paper that you have been writing since high school—into a new and unfamiliar one, and asking what it will take to prepare yourself for a career as a writer in your chosen professional modes.

As for those of you in or beyond the dissertation, I will say simply that I hope some of this explains why scholarly writing is so damn hard. You are the product of a system that, though it thinks incredibly well about other people's writing (literature, for example), does not think well—or act or institutionalize thoughtfully—about its own. The reality is, the difference between those who "succeed" and "fail" in the profession has as much to do with luck and mentoring as it has to do with ability or hard work. Better writing instruction cannot create more jobs for literature Ph.Ds but it can change *who* makes it to the tenure track and who publishes good work. When you treat writing as something that needs no instruction—or when your institutional patterns around writing actually make it harder to students to succeed—you reinforce the advantages of those students who come to graduate school already prepared to write. You double down on luck and class privilege; you make the system more arbitrary and unfair. Reading this book is designed to put you in a position to resist that unfortunate accomplishment.

I make no promises about outcomes in individual cases. But I am sure that I can help you understand what and how publishing scholars write, give you the tools you need to think about what scholarly writing is and what it does, and offer some helpful practical advice for putting together dissertations, articles, and books. I don't think you should waste time feeling angry or depressed about the way the system currently works. But I do think you can alter your relation to it by taking control of your own writing practice. I also hope that you will, if you ever get the chance, help change things for the next generation of students.

Three

Eight Strategies for Getting Writing Done

Different people have different ways of getting writing done. A colleague of mine swears that he spends months planning out an essay, laying out its evidence, structuring its arguments, and mortaring its outline. Then he sits down and writes the thing, all in order, in the course of a few days. Another friend doesn't write for months, then goes on two- or three-day sleepless writing binges; she emerges from her cave bearing the living body of an annunciated Jesus.

Neither of these strategies works for me. In fact I think they're a little bit crazy, and wouldn't recommend them to an enemy. But both these friends have published as much work as I have, so . . . your mileage may vary. The advice that follows borrows extensively from the history of my own writing practice, and has been good, so far as I know, for that of a number of friends and former students. If you can get things done by binge-writing or planning meticulously ahead, go for it; we're all just skinning cats in whatever way possible. If not, however, the following might help.

Let's start with fear. I am terrified—seriously terrified—of academic writing. Nothing that I do confronts me as strongly with a fear of total, consuming incompetence and inadequacy. The problem is that I am trying to be great, and I am (quite reasonably, unfortunately) afraid that I am not great. As a result I am occasionally tempted to take the advice the doctor gives the man who says, "It hurts when I do this": "Stop doing that." And it is probably true that giving up on being great would make

writing easier for me. When I write for *Printculture,* or when I worked as a journalist at the Associated Press, I never felt the anxiety I associate with scholarly writing. I also don't feel it when writing e-mails, annual reports, grant applications, or grocery lists. Those kinds of writing can be boring or institutionally complicated, but they don't involve a confrontation with the fear that I am not as good as I would like to be.

Unfortunately, at some level the ambition to do great work—to write something that matters not just to me but also to the community of peers I care most about, the people whose work I respect and admire most—is central to the ethos of why I write scholarship at all. I cannot imagine giving up on it, since to do so would be to settle for producing mediocre essays. As a matter of career survival, it *is* possible to get by on work one knows is mediocre, but, for me at least, such a thing would make it impossible to go on. I don't have to be great, but I have to be *trying* for greatness.

What this means is that everything that is weak in me—everything that would have me sleep another hour, avoid working out, put off cleaning the house, or delay a necessary apology to a friend—struggles to keep me from writing, fights to have me give up and be satisfied with the sentences I already have or the essays I've already published.

Your own psychological structure may differ—you may be afraid of something entirely different—but in general all academic writers suffer from some kind of writing fear. Students often hear that half of the people who start graduate school don't finish. One of the main stumbling blocks is the dissertation, which is the first encounter students have to the kinds of professional writing demands and practices that will govern the rest of their academic careers. Those demands and practices produce a specific form of anxiety. The ultimate truth about graduate school is that successful academics are not always the smartest ones in their cohorts. They're the ones who manage that anxiety well, who learn to live with their fears and continue, despite everything, to write.

Here follow eight rules that have helped me realize that continuance.

1. *Write daily*. This is the oldest trick in the book: accomplish psychologically difficult tasks by making them habitual. Habits mitigate much of the difficulty in the psychological *choice* to do something unpleasant, instead turning it into the kind of automatic behavior that allows us all to

continue brushing our teeth on a daily basis (and flossing on the morning before a visit to the dentist). Building habits, however, can be difficult: a 2009 study by Phillippa Lally and her collaborators at University College, London, found that habitual automaticity takes on average sixty-six days to build—meaning that it takes about two months until something is as habitual as it's going to get. Automaticity, the research suggested, takes longer for tasks requiring more self-discipline; making a habit of daily sit-ups will be harder than eating a daily piece of fruit. (Overall, participants in Lally's study took between 18 and 254 days to form a habit, but some did not form a habit at all, suggesting that individual differences will matter a great deal when developing habit automaticity.) What all this suggests is that you should plan on at least two months of steady, solid self-discipline to create a new habit. But the good news for most people is that, at some point, automaticity will kick in and make things much, much easier.

Writing every day is difficult because everyone has any number of other things to do, most of which frighten them much less than writing. The key is to carve out a very small period of time for writing each day, putting it in both your physical and mental calendars, and convincing yourself that having that time is a way of *taking care of yourself*. Once that is done, you need to protect your writing time vigorously, both from others and from yourself. This means definitively scheduling this time and not moving it around or interrupting it, even when it seems perfectly reasonable to do so. Doctors, plumbers, teachers, friends, students, and even your family and children will all live, and live happily, if you consistently refuse to be available from, say, 9 to 10 every morning. Or even 9 to 9:30.

I recommend the morning for two reasons: first, research by Stanford University's Kelly McGonigal has shown that willpower is a finite psychological resource that gets used up over the course of a day and replenished in sleep. This means that you have more willpower in the morning than you do in the afternoon. As a result it's far easier to build and keep difficult habits in the morning. You can save your willpower-depleted evenings for other, easier habits, like having a drink after dinner. Second, practicing virtuous behavior in the morning lets you feel good about yourself for the rest of the day. I've found that it's impossible to really enjoy your afternoon if you have an unpleasant task waiting for you at 5:00 P.M. Whereas

having coffee with friends or watching a show on TV at the end of a day in which you've faced and bested your demons feels like an appropriate reward for your matinal virtue.

How long should you write? During the school year, when you're teaching, thirty minutes a day is fantastic. If you manage to average slightly more than that—by writing for an hour or two, perhaps, on days when you don't teach—you're doing incredibly well. During the summer or on school breaks I tend to write for three to four-and-a-half hours a day, always in a sequence of three sessions: 9:30–11:00 A.M, a break for lunch, 11:45 A.M to 1:00 P.M., another break for a snack and internet, and then 1:30–3:00 P.M. I've found that I can't really concentrate for much longer than ninety minutes, and sometimes I actually can't make it through the third session. When that happens I switch over to reading, or sometimes I just take a break. But that's just me. Other friends have been using and praising Francesco Cirillo's "Pomodoro Technique," which involves breaking work up into 25-minute chunks followed by short breaks. You might try, during the school year, writing for one or two Pomodoros a day, and expanding those periods during breaks. What both patterns have in common is that they are patterns. I suspect that the fact of having a pattern matters more than which pattern it really is.

Part of building this habit involves speaking about it others. Narrating your process (I do X for Y minutes a day; I do X for Z minutes during breaks; then I start again) by sharing it with friends helps externalize it, and makes it something that exists outside your own drive and desire. A pattern's external existence makes it easier for you to feel responsible to it, rather than treating it as an easily modifiable expression of your current mood or state of affairs. In other words, it makes it a habit.

For about eight years I gave myself word-count goals, but I've since stopped focusing so much on counts because it was making me nervous. In summer I still aim for around two pages a day, and on days I reach that aim early I sometimes call it quits to celebrate. I essentially have two goals: two pages or three sessions of writing, whichever comes first. That way I can be assured of accomplishing something, without putting pressure on myself to write 600 words of new material. Some days what you already have written needs to be worked on before you can move forward; concentrating on that labor, and allowing it to count as

Fortifying Your Habit

A writing habit will benefit from being located inside a series of actions and spaces, both physical and temporal, that function as its enabling context. Together these can create a pattern of physical and mental activity that enables you to get work done. For instance, I only write in my office. I begin serious writing days by establishing a sensory space governed by white "noise": I put on headphones (always listening to something I know well, usually Radiohead, seven or eight albums in a row on repeat) and I begin chewing gum (this helps me concentrate; it's like white noise for your mouth). I then start playing Freecell (a solitaire card game); the focus it requires helps me begin to shut out other noises and concerns. After about fifteen minutes, I open the relevant document files and begin to work. For lunch I eat the same thing every day (a bagel with cream cheese); likewise for the snack that comes after the second writing session. I only leave my office to go to the bathroom, but I keep my headphones on and avoid talking to people. I have the phone, internet browser, and e-mail shut down (though I do browse, and sometimes check e-mail, during breaks). Together these practices aim to put me into what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has called a "flow" state, in which I become fully immersed in the writing task, essentially unaware of the passage of time or of the world outside my work. The micro-habits associated with the larger habit of writing help protect and insulate my writing practice; they create a pathway into, and out of, the mental discipline I need to get over my anxieties and begin to write.

meeting a goal, helps prevent tying yourself to unrealistic and unproductive goal-making.

Nonetheless I want to point out that if you can average two pages a day when you are not teaching—which shouldn't sound like much to someone who can write three seminar papers in three weeks—you can finish a full draft of a dissertation in one hundred days of writing, or roughly five months of work; or you can get a hundred pages of writing done in a summer. (This is assuming you don't write on the weekends; I generally don't). You'll have to rewrite and revise that dissertation, which will take at least another five or six months. Throw in another six to eight months of reading and you're at about a year and a half. Give yourself another half year for things to go wrong and get fixed, and your total time invested reaches roughly two years.

Though that may sound reasonable, almost no one I know has written a dissertation in less time than that. Why not? Mostly, I think, because they came into the dissertation having to learn how to really write one—not only how to write the actual chapters as chapters (and not as seminar papers), but how to develop a practice of writing that would support the sustained, longer process of production and revision that dissertations needed. As a result much of their time was spent learning both a new writing practice and a new written genre. Their first chapters became the laboratories of that practice, and thus often took a full year to write. If graduate programs taught writing more comprehensively and responsibly, we could avoid some of that wasted time and especially avoid the cruelty of its psychological effects on students, who spend that first chapter wondering whether they're going to make it, whether they're good enough, whether they'll run out of funding, and so on, when they should be working on their research, their sentences, and their arguments. If your dissertation is still ahead of you, the best thing you can do for yourself is to develop a set of writing habits now that will allow you to come into that challenge as a successful writer.

Another advantage of writing to a rule each day is that it frees you, psychologically, from one of the more difficult forms of anxiety in our profession: not knowing when it's ok to not be writing. I struggled a great deal in graduate school with guilt and unease over how much I wrote because, of course, I could *always* have been writing. I could have slept less; I could have played fewer computer games; I could have gone out less often with friends. At its worst that guilt made it hard for me to enjoy the fun things I was doing. By doing my writing first and establishing a set of habits that validated my own work process, I not only knew when I should be working, I also knew when I didn't have to be working. That I was good company at all during those years owes itself largely to the fact that, having written my two pages a day, usually by sometime around 3:00 P.M., I knew I was allowed to enjoy myself. This is also, by the way, why I prefer to write in the office: it helps build habit automaticity by giving me a standard place to write, but it also helps me know that when I am not in the office, I don't have to be working, leaving me free to enjoy home life.

2. *Make small goals and meet them.* Whether you choose to write for a time or to a word count, you will sometimes not reach your goal for the day. One of the most important things my advisor Jane Gallop taught me was that unmet goals don't create habits. For this reason you absolutely need to focus on giving yourself *small, easily achievable* goals. Don't plan to write four pages a day; don't try to write eight hours a day (or two hours a day when you're teaching). Focus on the slow and steady. Your job is to making meeting goals a regular part of your life, to become a *goal-meeting person.*

Among other things this principle determines how you behave when you miss a goal. Lally's research shows that people who miss occasional goals do not suffer much when it came to automating habits. It's only when you make a huge deal of the missed goal that it can become one. So you should try to forgive yourself immediately if you fail to meet a daily goal. For the same reason that you don't desert a diet because you had three hamburgers at the barbeque, or give up on mastering a step-over move because you missed a day of soccer practice, you cannot allow small lapses in habit-creating behavior to alter the general structure governing your work process. Look forward: if you can't eliminate your guilt by forgiving yourself, concentrate on meeting today's goal, and feeling good about doing so.

Above all, don't add today's "gap" to tomorrow's task. If you only wrote one page today, that does not mean you have to write three pages tomorrow. Sitting down to write three pages is harder than sitting down to write two, which makes your habit-creating pattern that much harder to begin. Those extra pages have a way of spiraling out of control, leading to a day when, faced with the idea that you have to "catch up" by ten pages or so, you simply give up and eat a bag of Doritos instead. (I have done this, by the way. The chips were delicious.)

Making and meeting small goals also determines the kind of relationship you have with yourself. I don't want to live in a world in which some part of me regularly punishes another part of me for not behaving well, in which I simultaneously occupy the roles of Marine drill sergeant and recruit ("Get up maggot!! If you're not puking, you're not working!!"). I find it more helpful (and this really is true) to imagine that the part of me

that knuckles down is working on behalf of the part of me that would prefer to avoid the writing scene entirely, and I do my best to be grateful for all the things that first part of me has helped the complete entity known as "Eric Hayot" accomplish. (I realize this is a little weird, but honestly, it's how it works for me. When I write I occasionally leave notes to myself in my file at the end of the day offering encouragement to the me of tomorrow. The most embarrassing of these, written sometime in 2006, read: "Good job, Eric. You are a very good boy.") Knowing what I am and am not capable of helps me set goals that I can reach, and creates a pattern of self-motivation and self-reward that keeps me happy.

For that same reason you should also reward yourself for meeting goals. If you have ten pages by Thursday, take a Friday off to celebrate. Or spend the day writing, but without any pressure to reach a limit or to continue when you're tired. Such "windfall" writing (the term is Paul Silva's) often turns out to be the best of your week. Go easy. Focus on building the habits, not on defeating or overmastering them. Treat yourself as though you care about yourself (even if, as is so often true, you sometimes can't, or don't). Developing a two-page-a-day habit during breaks from school will be enough to finish a dissertation, get tenure, and have a significant and serious career as a publishing writer.

3. *When you're stuck, keep writing.* Of course, you will get stuck. You will get stuck on a macro level, when after three or four months of work you lose faith in your article or chapter and fear that you may need to start over. And you will get stuck on a micro level, having days where it feels like you're going backwards, or ones when you simply can't write anything at all.

The solution to both problems is the same: keep writing. Many micro-level problems can be solved by opening up a new file and freewriting for five to ten minutes. Freewriting is typing or handwriting, nonstop, whatever comes into your head. I usually start with, "Eric, you are now beginning to freewrite. You are stuck in the article because you cannot . . . " Don't stop typing or moving your pen; don't censor yourself; don't correct spelling errors. Just commit to writing nonstop for a set period of time. Often over the course of ten minutes you will write your way into a solution, or find that at some point your prose switches over from "free" to focused and engaged, adopting midstream the vocabulary and sentence

structures of your project. For less serious problems, you may simply want to force yourself to sit at your desk for just a bit longer. (One of my automatic responses to feeling stuck is to want to walk away from the computer. Whenever I feel my leg muscles beginning to lift me off the chair, I force myself to sit and stare at the screen for five more minutes. Sometimes I freewrite a few sentences. Nine out of ten times this gets me through the problem.)

For larger problems, I recommend two approaches: first, go back and reread everything you have. Initially you may simply want to do this as a way of revising and rethinking, so that you spend your time reworking sentences and paragraphs, adding or removing metalanguage, and seeing more clearly the structure that you have so far. At some point you may want to create an outline of the work you have, describing as clearly as you can to yourself the logic of your argument and the organization of its evidence (read more on structure in part 2). Then spend some time writing a description (in sentences) of the outline of your piece, discussing the ways in which what you have sets up later parts of the structure, or creates promises and obligations to fulfill. Sometimes the answer to being stuck lies not in the sentences but in the structure. Seeing how the structure may be causing your problem will be enough to allow you to alter it and make the problem disappear.

If you are still stuck, a good second approach is to have a friend, colleague, or advisor read your work and talk the problem through. We all have a tendency to only show our writing to people when we're happy with it. I can always tell when my graduate students are struggling because they start avoiding me in the hallways or on e-mail. Their writing is not going well; they miss a few days of work in despair; they begin to feel guilty; they want to solve the problem before they see me again. But this is crazy behavior, like only going to see the doctor when you're well. Part of my *job*, I tell students, is to help them write their dissertations. If they avoid me when things are going badly, I cannot help. And I want to help!

If you don't have a helpful advisor, try very hard to build up a network of peers with whom to share work. I believe in and have enjoyed writing groups, including an excellent one in Los Angeles, though often I get more out of group discussions from commenting on the work of others than I do from hearing about my own. (Part of the problem is that more than two

The Writing Camp

One of the things I've done over the years is to organize a writing weekend with a good friend. We do the reading ahead of time, then get together and devote one day to one person's work, the next to the other's. (Two chapters are usually about enough for a weekend.) With more time, I've done something weeklong, in which a friend and I wrote in the mornings, read each other's material in the early afternoons, and talked about the work over drinks in the evening. These camps have been great both for improving my work and for strengthening friendships; they're as much about the pleasure of being engaged with one another as about the writing that they help make possible.

or three people talking about writing makes everyone too nice, and usually not specific enough.) I prefer to share writing one-on-one with close friends, people whose opinions I trust and, most importantly, who give me the kind of writing advice I know will be useful to me. Lucky people will make such friends in graduate school, though I did it mostly afterwards—and in fact still continue to collect new friends with whom I share work.

Above all, do not give up. Two especially pernicious fantasies lie at the root of many forms of blockage: the idea that you are supposed to get everything right the first time around (because everyone else does, allegedly), and the fear that you have somehow reached a limit (of ability) beyond which you cannot pass. Try not to make up crazy rules about how long it should take you to finish or what your process should look like. Don't hold yourself to imaginary standards: I once told my teacher Kristie Kaufman that I was hoping the third chapter of my dissertation would only take me four drafts, since the previous two had taken five each and I thought four would be an improvement. "Why do you care?" she asked. "Maybe it just takes you five drafts to make things good." "Good" is the standard. No one ever got any bonus points for finishing in three drafts instead of five, or three weeks instead of two months; no one has ever praised or published a bad book on the grounds that it only took a year to write. And try not to despair unreasonably. My friend Greg Jackson once told me that he wouldn't allow himself to get depressed until he had spent as long on a new project as he had on the previous successful one.