



How I Write by James

Getting Started

When getting started, the most important thing I like to remember is that writing is really, really hard. So often we are highly critical of ourselves and certain that we are bad writers, but writing is always a challenge no matter who you are. That's also why it can be so rewarding. I think the key is to anticipate and mentally prepare for the realities of academic writing, but also to build a number of tips, tricks, and techniques into your writing repertoire to help smooth out the process.

My background is in the sciences, with a focus on environmental science and management. Consequently, the large majority of my work is scientific writing, which tends towards a more objective and concise tone. That being said, I take that tradition with a grain of salt. Building flow and narrative – and even a measured dose of creativity – is just as important for good scientific writing as it is in other disciplines.

My own writing process is both organized and unorganized, though more frequently the latter.

The Organized

Academic writing is very structured, so unlike in a novel you don't want to surprise the reader with your conclusions or with sudden plot twists. Consequently, I find that spending time to build a strong outline to be the most important part of writing. I like to map out the topics of not only every section of a paper, but every paragraph, so that I can see the overarching flow of the entire paper at once. This also helps me to keep my ramblings within the defined scope of the paper, as it's incredibly easy to get off topic while writing. I also like to ballpark word count targets for each topic, both as a motivational tool and to plan how much depth I will go into on a given topic.

The hard question then becomes what topics are to be included in the paper. For me, this all depends on my level of familiarity and understanding of the topic that I'm writing about. Or, in other words, do I need to hit the books before I map out an outline, or do I feel I know enough to build an outline right away before doing some reading? Importantly, the specific topics and their order in the paper may change as I continue my research and writing, and almost always the total number of outlined topics I intend to address gets smaller.

Lastly, I find I can't write anything unless I have several uninterrupted hours. I try to book off entire mornings when I'm the most productive, turn off my devices, and stay offline for a hopefully productive stretch of writing.

The Unorganized

In working at Ryerson's Writing Support and Graduate Student Support for several years, I've become very good at giving advice to students that I don't follow myself. In reality, last minute panic is as integral to my writing process as the alphabet. The critical point for me these days, however, is to understand how long it will take to not just write, but to plan out my writing, research it, cite my sources, and conduct several revisions.

There are other unorganized elements of writing that also tend to work for me. Once in a blue moon I find that I'm in some kind of state where I can get out several thousand words in a sitting. If and when this actually happens, I drop everything so that I can capitalize on the productivity. However, far more often I encounter the opposite, where I can't even finish a sentence. To help alleviate writer's block, I prefer to go for a walk with my dog in the park. That being said, I know what I really should do is start reading.

If I'm in a frustrated state of writer's block, often the last thing I want to do is go back to the literature and read. But, when I finally force myself to go back to some of my better readings, all these ideas will start pouring out – often ideas that aren't even related to what I'm reading. I was often taught that writing is an organized, linear process. First, conduct your literature review by reading one paper at a time, then write down what you learned. I'm unable to write anything coherent without continuously reading throughout the process, and I'm unable – or unwilling – to read without stopping often to write.

Bringing It Together

As with my messy back-and-forth process of reading and writing, I also continuously revise throughout my writing. My first iterations of sentences and paragraphs are rife with errors and read like they were written by an angry teenager. I only focus on getting ideas down on the page before they're lost. The grammar, structure, and fancy academic language get added to the writing in later revisions. Lastly, I strive to plan ahead so that I have at least a day or two of leaving the piece of writing alone to let it stew. I find this to be really helpful for my final reading and revision. The time spent away helps me to forget what was going through my head at the time of writing so that I can give it a more objective and critical final revision. The final hurdle is then just hitting that send button to submit your writing to its intended audience.