



## How I Write by Madeleine

The most played song on my iTunes is *Karma Chameleon* by Culture Club.

I cringed as I typed that. If you ask me who my favourite musician is, I will tell you Leonard Cohen, which isn't untrue; I love Leonard Cohen, but I've listened to *Karma Chameleon* hundreds more times than any of his songs. Last April I had a depressing number of papers to write, and that ridiculous 1980s torch song was the perfect combination of peppy and awful—the melody was energizing enough to help me weather major sleep deprivation and pump out thousands of words during crunch time. So naturally, I listened to it on repeat, all day long.

Admitting that on paper is spectacularly embarrassing for me, for two reasons. First, because it reveals the horrendous shift my musical tastes take when I'm under the gun, and second, because it paints a very different impression of the graduate writing process than I would imagine most undergraduate students have. Contrary to what I envisaged, writing in grad school (or at least, the way I write) is messy.

Some aspects of graduate school culture are delightful: the camaraderie, shared passion for learning, invigorating debates and discussions, and the general engrossingness of it. They are what drew me to pursue a Master's and PhD in the first place; when I feel like quitting, these things sustain me. However, during my four years of grad school, I've discovered some negative traits also deeply embedded in the culture. The stakes are high; we're under tremendous pressure to produce, present, and publish innovative research, which is then subjected to often biting criticism from other members of the academic community. Indeed, the academic "cycle" is quite discouraging at times. It doesn't help that many of us also seem to abide by an unspoken rule of not allowing our peers to see the struggle. We often suffer in isolation from one another. The façade is competence and mastery; the reality is *Karma Chameleon*.

In writing this piece and sharing some of my writing struggles, I hope to help dismantle some deeply rooted misconceptions about the graduate writing process, and to challenge this culture of perfectionism and isolation.

## Writing Consultants Are People Too

Ernest Hemingway once quipped, "There is nothing to writing. All you have to do is sit at a typewriter and bleed." I try to remember this on unproductive days, when running a marathon sounds more appealing than writing a paper. On these days, I have fleeting bursts of inspiration peppered with "writing sessions" that are laughably unproductive. These sessions chiefly involve aimless Facebook

browsing, compulsive news reading, falling into Twitter wormholes...in short, anything other than actual writing. I used to consider these days a waste of time, and felt horrendously guilty about them. I've since come to realize these are "thinking days", or days where my brain is getting acquainted with the concepts I'm trying to write about. It took me years of gut-wrenching shame and impostor syndrome (a term worth researching if you don't know what it is, by the way) to figure this out.

## A Guide to (Effective) Writing for the Chronically Last Minute

Some of my fellow students are admirably disciplined, setting a daily agenda complete with writing goals, working diligently for eight or so hours before shutting their laptops for the evening and taking a well-earned break. I've come to accept that despite my best efforts, this is not possible for me. I work best when everyone else is asleep, between the hours of 8pm and 4am. It's exhausting and preposterous, but it gets the job done. My advice is to find what works for you and stick to it.

### Tackling Procrastination and Writer's Block

I fully admit to having had a bad case of writer's block through my journey writing THIS piece. In other words, I've been through the mill on this one and fully sympathize. Often at the root of writer's block are feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. You know, those nagging thoughts telling you that you're simply not up to the job. What I've found works best in quashing these feelings of inadequacy is to talk about them with your peers and professors—I guarantee they've gone through the same thing! In my experience, empathy and support are the best antidotes to writer's block.

### Managing Deadlines

Some of us need a healthy dose of pressure to meet deadlines and are inspired by the stress. Or is this simply another lie we procrastinators tell ourselves (in addition to those like, "I'll work better after I finish this season on Netflix")? I often wonder whether I really get my best ideas when I'm under the gun, or if they just feel like my best ideas because I'm under the gun. I will never know. What I do know is that managing deadlines is crucial to having a successful academic career.

In my Master's, by some miracle, I once managed to write nearly 200 pages of a thesis in about four months. I got everything done (in a flurry of coffee, crumpled papers, and crashing Word documents), but it was a close call. Fortunately,

deadlines in grad school are somewhat flexible, and if you have put in a genuine effort but have run into roadblocks, I've found profs, journal editors, etc. are usually sympathetic.

### Revision and Editing

Have you ever read a first draft of *The Great Gatsby*? I would hazard a guess Fitzgerald felt the same way about his first draft of *Gatsby* as we students do about our first stab at any essay. I've learned to accept that I will hate the first draft of anything that I write, be it an email, report, journal paper, or thesis. This helps me be kinder to myself and makes muddling through the draft a little less painful. Once you have the first draft done, congratulate yourself. The hardest part is over; all you have left to do is revise, revise, revise!

If anything, I hope this helped someone feel a little less alone in his or her writing process. We may all have different processes, but we are all united in a similar struggle. Instead of feeling guilty or ashamed, view your writing struggle as a badge of honour—and wear it with pride.