

Learning how to write better:

a commentary for members of the high-output writing programme

Brian Martin

26 June 2018

Writing well is hard to do. By working at it, we can improve. Insights about doing this are available from research on “expert performance”, which is the demonstrated expertise shown for example by elite athletes, chess players and classical musicians. In these areas, there are widely accepted criteria for success and methods of training are well developed.

This year, the second edition of *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* was published.¹ It is the authoritative source in the field. Aimed at professionals, it is not light reading! (For an accessible treatment, read the book *Peak*.²)

One of the chapters in the new handbook is “Professional writing expertise” by Ronald T. Kellogg.³ Here I’ll outline some of the points in Kellogg’s chapter, often by using quotations, and relate them to our high-output writing programme.

Writing is challenging

Writing extended texts for publication is a major cognitive challenge, even for professionals who compose for a living. Serious writing is at once a thinking task, a language task, and a memory task. All three cognitive functions can be overloaded by the demands of composing an extended text that clearly communicates the author’s thoughts and artfully connects with its intended readers. (p. 413)

¹ K. Anders Ericsson, Robert R. Hoffman, Aaron Kozbelt and A. Mark Williams (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 2018, 2nd edition).

² Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool, *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise* (London: Bodley Head, 2016)

³ Ronald T. Kellogg, “Professional writing expertise,” in *The Cambridge Handbook*, pp. 413–430.

If you're finding writing hard, don't worry, it's the task that's challenging. Every writer has to work hard to get better. So what makes it hard?

In a seminal psychological model of written composition, Hayes and Flower (1980) distinguished three basic processes of text production: planning ideas, translating ideas into text, and reviewing ideas and text. (p. 414)

These aren't separate stages of writing, but are all involved throughout the writing process. Rather than keeping them all in your head at once, it can be useful to separate them, for example by planning your ideas in advance of the writing session and, when you write, not analysing the text right then but saving that task until later. That's what we recommend in the writing programme. Kellogg says the same thing:

A variety of cognitive stratagems help the writer to cope with the cognitive demands of text production. Pre-writing, drafting, and revising are essential strategies. Preparing an outline as a pre-writing strategy enables the writer to focus attention on translating ideas into text while drafting and can enhance productivity (Kellogg, 1988). ... Preparing a rough draft can help writers to reduce the number of processes juggled simultaneously by dissociating the author from an editing mindset (Glynn, Britton, Muth, & Dogan, 1982). ... "Letting go" during a first draft may be especially critical in poetry composition and other creative writing. (pp. 418–419)

Emotional factors

... professional writers owe their success in part to learning how to overcome working memory constraints and to managing the frustrations and other negative emotions that can block less experienced writers. (p. 414)

Ah, the negative emotions. They can be overcome.

Whether one publishes or perishes can turn on emotional and motivational factors involved in text production rather than purely cognitive abilities. Consider that the main hindrances to productive writing in PhD candidates are: (1) emotional blocks and procrastination, (2) an attitude of perfectionism,

and (3) a belief that writing talent is innate rather than developed through experience and practice (Lonka et al., 2014). (p. 420)

There are ways to overcome emotional barriers. Kellogg cites Robert Boice, whose work is foundational for our writing programme, as well as others.

Learning to manage the emotional ups and downs of writing is important for writers to avoid burning out and perhaps ending their career prematurely. Self-regulation through daily writing, brief work sessions, realistic deadlines, and maintaining low emotional arousal help professional writers stay with the task for the weeks, months, and years required (Boice, 1994; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). Binge writing — hyponomadic, euphoric, marathon sessions to meet unrealistic deadlines — is generally counterproductive and potentially a source of depression and blocking (Boice, 1997). (p. 422)

Kellogg addresses an issue that we deal with indirectly in the writing programme: writing for an audience. Writing to express yourself is fine, but to communicate effectively you need to anticipate how readers will respond to your words. When we read each other's texts in the weekly meetings, we give feedback on writing that can help you understand how readers (us!) respond to your words. In the next quote, Kellogg expresses what's involved. He refers to "representations," which are just ways of thinking about some text. We have our own way of thinking about what we write (that's our personal representation), but we can also imagine how a reader will think about what we write (that's the reader's representation).

In knowledge crafting, the writer must be able to take the perspective of an imagined reader and compare this representation to both the author's current ideas and the author's comprehension of the text. In doing so, professional writers aim to craft their knowledge, through their writing, to the needs of a specific audience. Knowledge crafting requires not only adeptly juggling planning, sentence generation, and reviewing but also maintaining in working memory three different representations. Professional revision of the text can thus go beyond simply detecting mismatches between the author's intent and the text as it reads to the author. Rather, the professional writer aims to see the text as a reader would see it. (p. 323)

The skill of seeing our text through the eyes of a reader is something that takes time to develop. It can help to think of someone who might be a reader, such as a friend or a colleague, and imagine how they'll respond.

As Ong (1975) correctly observed, the ability to take the reader's perspective fully into account is what separates the beginning scholar from the mature scholar. (p. 424).

You need to practise and get feedback

... professionals improve their writing skills through writing often, receiving feedback from colleagues, and devoting high levels of cognitive effort to their work. (p. 424)

In developing professional expertise, it has long been known that writers need coaching through feedback. (p. 424)

In our weekly meetings, we give each other feedback on small portions of text. It's also important to seek feedback on drafts of larger pieces of writing. Tara Gray, in *Publish and Flourish* — the book that stimulated me to set up the writing programme — recommends seeking comments from non-experts, making revisions, and then seeking comments from experts, making revisions, all before submitting an article to a journal.⁴

In a different chapter in the *Handbook*, Anders Ericsson — the world's leading researcher on expert performance — points to the importance of obtaining immediate feedback from teachers, trying out the new skill and then practising the skill in the following days so it becomes automatic. This way of developing skills is called deliberate practice.

Deliberate practice is just one type of practice and this type has been discovered to yield impressive improvement of performance and it combines several elements, such as effective teachers, immediate feedback, and

⁴ Tara Gray, *Publish and Flourish: Become a Prolific Scholar* (Albuquerque, NM: New Mexico State University Teaching Academy, 2005).

opportunity for repetitions.⁵

Some students, when learning a musical instrument, have private lessons (one-on-one with a teacher) once every week. The teacher assesses the student's skills and assigns tasks for practising during the following week. Tasks need to be set at the right level to provide challenges that can be overcome, in this way maximising progress.

The value of one-on-one teaching may be a reason why home schooling can be so effective. A parent who gives their child even just 30 minutes of immediate feedback and guidance per day is providing more personalised help than a typical school student will obtain in a full day of classes, where teachers must cope with groups.

In writing, it is unusual for learners at any level to have frequent close scrutiny from a skilled professional. PhD students in the humanities and social sciences are especially poorly served, often only obtaining feedback from their supervisors every few months. (Some science students work with their supervisors every day in the lab.)

Anything you can do to get feedback on your writing can be helpful. For maximum benefit, you should study every suggestion, try to understand the thinking behind it, and then do some writing in which you revise your thinking and expression accordingly.

This might sound like hard work, and sometimes it is. But learning to write better pays off in the long term. Think of the years ahead. You can either continue writing at your current level, or continue to improve and be able to do a lot better with less effort.

Our writing programme provides help for learning in ways that research shows are effective. Your commitment is what is required to take maximum advantage of this opportunity.

⁵ K. Anders Ericsson, "The differential influence of experience, practice, and deliberate practice on the development of superior individual performance of experts," in *The Cambridge Handbook*, pp. 745–769, at p. 764.