

Air & Light & Time & Space

HOW SUCCESSFUL
ACADEMICS WRITE

Helen Sword



Harvard University Press

Cambridge, Massachusetts | London, England

2017

Introduction

Building the BASE

When I first set out to write a book about the writing habits of successful academics, I had no real idea what I would find—or even what I was trying to find out. I had already published two books on academic writing: one outlining the key principles of “fit and trim” prose (*The Writer’s Diet*), the other asserting that “stylish academic writing” is not an oxymoron but an achievable ideal (*Stylish Academic Writing*).¹ But whenever I was invited to talk about these books with faculty and graduate students, I noticed how quickly our conversations about sentence structure and style strayed to other writing-related issues: for example, work-life balance (“How am I supposed to find time to write stylishly when I’ve got a heavy teaching load and a new baby?”) or power dynamics (“I’d like to write in a more personal voice, but my PhD supervisor won’t let me”) or emotion (“I love to write poetry and stories, but I find academic writing to be unpleasant and stressful”). Gradually, my scholarly gaze began to lift from the words on the page to the people who put them there, and I realized that my next book would have to focus not on writing but on writers.

Over the next four years, I conducted in-depth, on-the-record interviews with one hundred exemplary academic writers and editors from across the disciplines and around the world—with “exemplary” writ large to encompass a wide range of criteria beyond conventional markers of academic success. Alongside scholarly superstars with distinguished career tracks and prolific publication rates, I sought out other kinds of exemplars: for

example, lesser-known academics from underrepresented cultural, ethnic, and gender minorities who have survived and even thrived in academe; scholars who have followed nontraditional paths into and through their disciplines; successful international researchers for whom English is not their first language; path-breaking thinkers whose writing has taken the scholarship of their field in new directions; academic risk takers who have subverted or challenged disciplinary conventions; effective communicators who have engaged with audiences beyond academe; inspiring teachers and generous mentors who have devoted time and energy to helping their colleagues and students become better writers; and early- to midcareer faculty who contentedly balance their work and family commitments, without the agony, angst, and uncertainty that characterize the writing lives of so many of their peers. (If that's not academic success, what is?) Along the way, I also collected anonymous questionnaire data from 1,223 faculty members, PhD students, postdoctoral researchers, and independent scholars who attended my writing workshops at more than fifty universities and scholarly conferences in fifteen countries. Although they are not the main players in the book, their voices provide the chorus.

At first, I expected that the interviews and questionnaires would provide me with robust comparative data about two clearly demarcated sets of informants: "successful writers" (the hand-picked interview subjects) and "struggling writers" (the faculty and graduate students who signed up for my workshops on how to become a more productive writer). Before long, however, I came to recognize the folly of my assumption. Not only did the two cohorts overlap significantly, but pitting successful writers against struggling writers turned out to be a false opposition. Many of the academics I interviewed, including tenured faculty members who had been recommended to me by their own discipline-based peers, responded to my initial approach by protesting, "I don't know why you would want to talk to me; I'm not a particularly prolific writer" or "I'm not a very stylish writer, if that's what you're looking for" or "To be honest, I really struggle with my writing." Conversely, just about every person who attended one of my writing workshops and filled out my data questionnaire could be labeled "exemplary" according to at least one of my inter-

view criteria. Indeed, I hope that all readers of this book will recognize themselves somewhere in my commodious definitions of *exemplary*, *successful*, and *productive*.

If I initially imagined that my research would allow me to make authoritative claims about the characteristic writing habits of specific demographic groups—North Americans versus Europeans, or women versus men, or art historians versus biologists—that fantasy, too, soon faded. I collected a good deal of fascinating qualitative and quantitative data about the backgrounds, habits, and emotions of the academic writers I surveyed, and insights drawn from that data have in turn informed the structure and content of this book. However, within the first dozen or so interviews, I realized that I would never be able to make confident pronouncements of the "scientists are from Jupiter, humanists are from Saturn" variety. Instead, the more I looked for consistent behavioral patterns among the writers I spoke to, the more I was struck by the richness of their difference.

The futility of such scholarly typecasting struck me with particular force on the day I interviewed two colleagues who work in the same discipline and had recently been awarded the same prestigious research prize by the professional society to which they both belonged. Demographically—with regard to their age, gender, native language, educational background, academic rank, scholarly field, and institutional affiliation—they matched each other as closely as any other two academics in my interview cohort. Yet their personal affects and attitudes toward writing could hardly have been more different. One was self-confident, the other self-effacing; one was earnest, the other ironic; one clearly loved to write but spoke mostly about the agonies of writing, while the other clearly struggled to write but spoke mostly about its pleasures. Interviewed back-to-back, these two unique individuals reminded me that, in any enterprise as nuanced, varied, and deeply human as the writing process, personality trumps demography. (For a full account of my research methodology, including selection criteria, interview and questionnaire prompts, and demographic profiles of both survey groups, see the Appendix).

Many books, websites, and blogs on academic productivity convey the impression that there is only one way to be productive—the author's way. Their tone ranges from cheerfully bossy to

hectoring, and their dominant verb tense is the imperative: write every day; write in the same place every day; write before you're ready to write; shut up and write. While the methods they promote may prove highly beneficial to some writers, their one-size-fits-all prescriptiveness can also lead to feelings of inadequacy and guilt, especially for aspiring authors who, for whatever reason, fail to thrive under the designated regime. At the heart of much of the self-help literature lurks a puritanical belief that productivity is a mark of personal virtue, while failure to publish denotes a deep-seated character flaw.

This book takes a more holistic and inclusive view. Its key principles reflect the experiences and advice of successful academics from across a wide range of circumstances, and its ethos is one of experimentation, empowerment, and choice. The writers I interviewed share a flexible array of attitudes and attributes that I call their "BASE habits":

Behavioral habits. Successful writers carve out time and space for their writing in a striking variety of ways, but they all do it somehow. (Key habits of mind: persistence, determination, passion, pragmatism, "grit.")

Artisanal habits. Successful writers recognize writing as an artisanal activity that requires ongoing learning, development, and skill. (Key habits of mind: creativity, craft, artistry, patience, practice, perfectionism [but not too much!], a passion for lifelong learning.)

Social habits. Successful writers seldom work entirely in isolation; even in traditionally "sole author" disciplines, they typically rely on other people—colleagues, friends, family, editors, reviewers, audiences, students—to provide them with support and feedback. (Key habits of mind: collegiality, collaboration, generosity, openness to both criticism and praise.)

Emotional habits. Successful writers cultivate modes of thinking that emphasize pleasure, challenge, and growth. (Key habits of mind: positivity, enjoyment, satisfaction, risk taking, resilience, luck.)

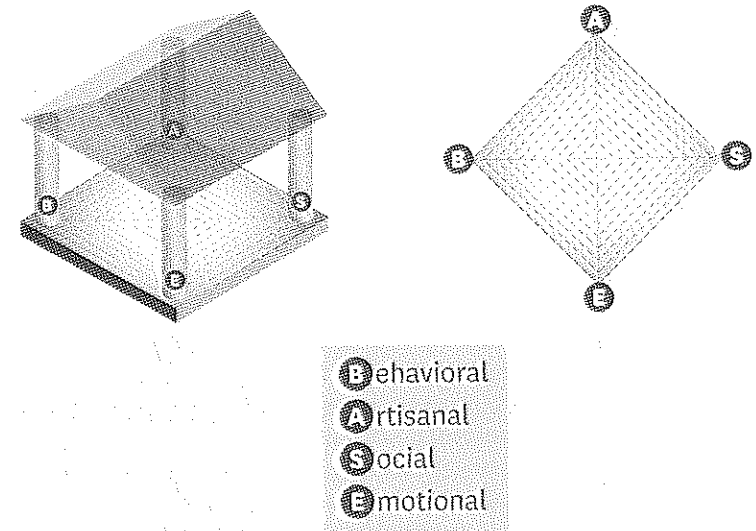


Figure 1. "House of writing" with its four BASE cornerstones (behavioral, artisanal, social, emotional).

All successful writers anchor their writing practice on these same four BASE cornerstones. However, just as there is no one-size-fits-all blueprint for creating a comfortable home, no two writers will start from exactly the same foundation or construct their house of writing in exactly the same way. (See Figure 1.)

The BASE model offers a flexible heuristic for visualizing the complexities of the writing process and developing strategies for lasting change. The diagnostic exercise on pages 8 and 9 will help you sketch the footprint of your own current writing practice—keeping in mind that your BASE may change its dimensions from day to day, from project to project, and even from one type of writing to another. (See Figure 2.) As a general rule, the broader and more symmetrical your BASE is, the more stable and spacious your House of Writing will be. Crucially, however, the BASE model does not restrict you to a zero-sum quantity of square footage. Indeed, one of the most effective strategies for broadening your BASE is to expand in several directions at once by leveraging

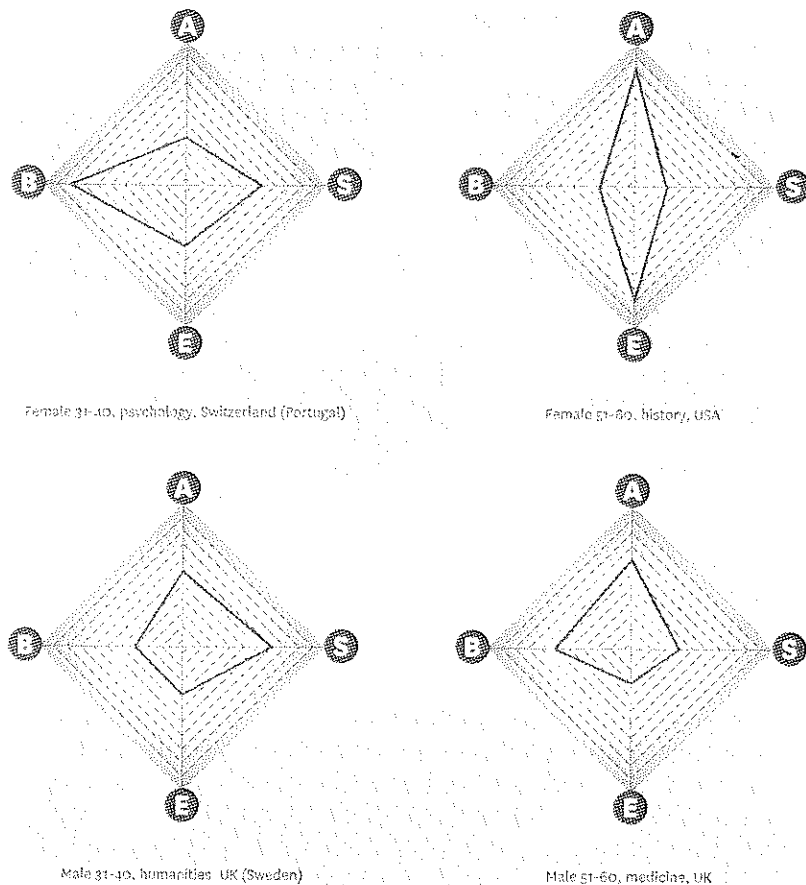


Figure 2. Examples of BASE diagrams completed by academics with a variety of demographic profiles (country of origin indicated in parentheses if different from country of residence).

your existing strengths. For example, if you are the kind of person who thrives on networking and interpersonal relationships (*social habits*), you could organize a writing group that focuses on improving work-life balance (*behavioral habits*) or team up with a colleague to offer constructive feedback on each other's writing (*artisanal habits*) or ask friends and family to support your career by helping you shore up your professional resilience (*emotional habits*).

The BASE habits of the one hundred academics I interviewed are proffered here in all their messiness, contradiction, and variety. I have not filtered out the voices of those whose practices fly in the face of the productivity literature; nor have I excluded those whose energy and outputs arguably impose unrealistic expectations on the rest of us, such as the eminent historian whose legendary penchant for generating 3,500 words every morning has spawned an Internet buzz phrase denoting any aspirational quantity of writing (the "Grafton Line").² Several early readers of my draft manuscript urged me to purge such paragons of productivity from the book: "If you profile their writing habits, people will think that you're holding them up as examples of how all academics are supposed to write." Really? I believe that my readers can be trusted to make their own judgments as to the kinds of writers they can reasonably aspire to become. (I, too, would love to leap out of bed refreshed after five hours of sleep and pump out 3,500 words of brilliant new prose before lunchtime; however, long years of experience have taught me that it's never going to happen. Nor will I ever become an Olympic athlete or win the Nobel Prize.)

Interwoven with the stories of the inspiring academic writers I interviewed are my own: the experiences of yet another struggling-yet-successful, successful-yet-struggling author whose BASE habits support a dwelling that is constantly in need of home improvement. More than twenty years after publishing my first scholarly book, I still find academic writing to be a frustrating, exhilarating, endlessly challenging process that never seems to get any easier—but that I wouldn't give up for the world.

DIAGNOSTIC EXERCISE: MAPPING THE BASE

This exercise is intended to be diagnostic rather than prescriptive, subjective rather than judgmental; the contours of your BASE may shift from one day to the next or from one writing project to another. For a digital version of the tool and a range of exercises on which to build, visit the Writer's BASE website at www.writersdiet.com/base.

Instructions:

For each of the BASE habits described below (behavioral, artisanal, social, emotional), assign yourself a ranking from 1 (low) to 10 (high).

B _____

Behavioral habits. My everyday academic writing habits are

- 9–10 excellent; I am a highly productive writer.
- 6–8 good but uneven.
- 3–5 unsatisfactory.
- 1–2 terrible; I feel unproductive most of the time.

A _____

Artisanal habits. My skills as an academic writer are

- 9–10 highly developed; I am confident in my ability to write clearly and well.
- 6–8 moderate.
- 3–5 underdeveloped.
- 1–2 very weak; other people seem to be much more competent writers than I am.

S _____

Social habits. I engage in productive conversations with other people about my writing and work-in-progress

- 9–10 frequently.
- 6–8 occasionally.
- 3–5 rarely.
- 1–2 almost never; I am a “lone wolf” scholar who shows other people my writing only when I feel it is ready to publish.

E _____

Emotional habits. When I think about my academic writing, the emotions I feel are

- 9–10 highly positive.
- 6–8 more positive than negative.
- 3–5 more negative than positive.
- 1–2 strongly negative; I hate to write.

On each of the four BASE axes in Figure 3 (numbered 0–10), place a dot corresponding to the number you chose for that category. Next, connect the dots. The resulting trapezoid represents the foundation on which your current writing practice rests.

Study your BASE carefully. Is it broad and well proportioned? Diamond shaped? Nearly triangular? How can you expand and strengthen the BASE? Where will you start?

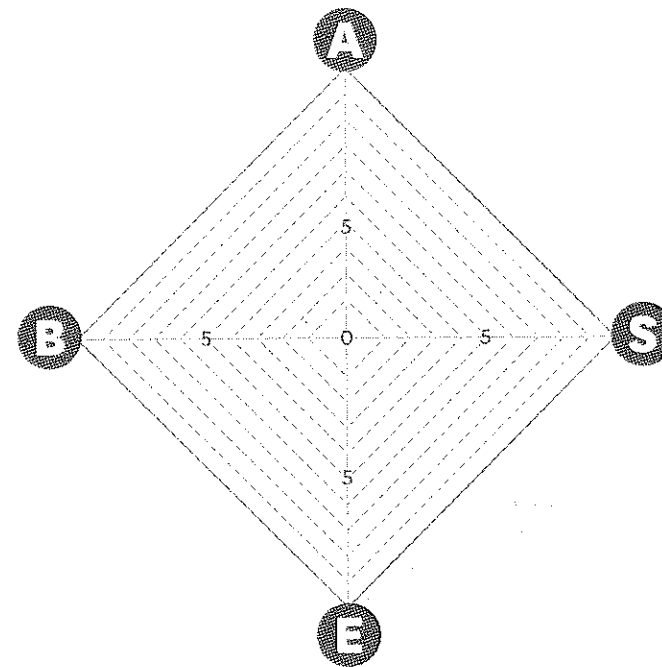


Figure 3. Enter your BASE scores on the diagram and connect the dots.