Writing Accountability Groups (WAGs): Establishing sustainable writing habits

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Objectives

1. To describe and explain why we WAG
2. To dispense with some writing myths and provide recommendations for common writing barriers
3. To inspire you to establish a writing habit
A little creative license with Snoopy...
Writing Accountability Groups (WAGs)

Bayview campus: Tuesdays, 09/24/13-11/26/13 (1-2PM)

Facilitator:
Kim Skarupski, PhD, MPH
Assistant Dean, Office of Faculty Dev.

• A WAG is an active writing group that meets weekly for a 10-week block
• Peer-facilitated
• Follows a strict agenda:
  – 15 minutes of updates
  – 30 minutes of writing
  – 15 minutes of reporting and wrap-up
• Participants must commit to at least 7 of the 10 sessions
• Limited to 4-8 members
• Bonus: Participants receive the “How to Write a Lot” book
• Bonus: Dr. Cathy DeAngelis has volunteered to edit WAG participants’ manuscripts
What is a WAG?

A WAG is a peer-facilitated, active writing group that meets once a week for 1 hour over a 10-week block:
- 15 minutes of updates and goal-setting
- 30 minutes of timed, communal writing
- 15 minutes of reporting and wrap-up

WAGs are focused on developing a **process** and **habit** of writing (no peer review of your writing)!

Limited to 4-8 members and you MUST commit to attending at least 7 of the 10 weekly sessions.
The Habit Loop

See Duhigg, 2012
63 WAGs (>320 WAGgers)

WAG Participants
(N=322)

- Female: 78.4%
- Male: 21.6%

Rank

- Assist. Prof.: 55.4%
- Postdoc/fellow: 14.6%
- Assoc. Prof.: 10.5%
- Instructor: 4.9%

At rank: mean = 3.4 years (SD = 3.6)

Track

- Clinical Researcher: 48.4%
- Basic Researcher: 20.3%
- Clinician Educator: 17.5%
- Clinical Program Builder: 6.0%
- Other: 5.1%
- Clinician Innovator: 1.8%

(WAGers)
How often do you write?

Writing Frequency

- Pre-WAG (n=322)
- Post-WAG (n=193)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Pre-WAG (%)</th>
<th>Post-WAG (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>every day</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>almost every day</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>71.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>once a week</td>
<td>33.7%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>twice a month</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>once a month</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rarely</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>never</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What is the duration of your typical writing session?

Writing Duration

0-15 minutes: 9.0% Pre-WAG, 7.6% Post-WAG
16-30 minutes: 22.3% Pre-WAG, 14.0% Post-WAG
31-45 minutes: 24.4% Pre-WAG, 27.5% Post-WAG
46-60 minutes: 19.2% Pre-WAG, 27.6% Post-WAG
1-2 hours: 19.0% Pre-WAG, 30.6% Post-WAG
2+ hours: 5.7% Pre-WAG, 3.0% Post-WAG

Pre-WAG (n=322)  Post-WAG (n=193)
Classic over-achiever syndrome; we’re never satisfied… ; )

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean (SD) Number of Publications</th>
<th>Mean (SD) Number of Grants (as PI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have</td>
<td>16.7 (23.2)</td>
<td>1.7 (2.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wish I had</td>
<td>23.3 (28.0)</td>
<td>2.9 (3.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Biggest Barriers to Writing

I have trouble getting started
My perfectionism prevents me from finishing
I have too many clinical commitments
I have too many teaching commitments
I have too many administrative commitments
I have too many personal/family commitments
I have difficulty with time management
I have too many meetings
I’m too busy writing grant applications
I have difficulty prioritizing
I don’t have adequate statistical/data analytic support
I don’t have anyone (mentors) to give me feedback and encourage me
I am not very interested in my topic
I don’t know what to write about
English is not my first language
My writing skills are poor
Writing is not as rewarding as other things
Other, please specify:
“Other” comments:

- I am afraid of failing
- I am over-committed/overwhelmed
- Can’t focus
- Too many different research projects going on to focus on one
- I enjoy more the process of data analysis rather than writing
- I don’t have funding to generate data
- No statistical support
- Lack of uninterrupted time
- There is always a grant that I need to work on
- Don’t know how; formula for writing; don’t know the format/structure; trouble finding right journal
- I feel that every topic from every angle has already been written about and published somewhere so I never know what value or contribution my work will have
- I get bored with some topics after numerous versions
- I think too much; get caught up in the conceptualization phase
- Hard to stay on top of the literature/get overwhelmed trying to synthesize literature
- Lack of membership in a productive group; no colleagues; no team/mentorship/irritated and demotivated by the inefficient teamwork and lack of collaboration
- Writing is not as rewarding as other things
“Writing productively is about actions that you aren’t doing but could easily do: making a schedule, setting clear goals, keeping track of your work, rewarding yourself, and building good habits.”
Myth #1: The myth of the muse

• **Myth:** “I need to be in the mood to write,” “I need to feel inspired,” “I need to feel motivated,” or the corollary, “I do my best work under pressure.”

• **Debunking:** Do you wait to be inspired to: see your patients, teach your classes, attend meetings, send emails? Writing is no different. There is NO writing muse. Writing is our job! Do your job every day. It’s the currency of our trade.

• **Suggestions:** Write a little every day (10-30-60 mins.) Schedule it in your calendar – respect it, show up, come on time, come prepared, be in the moment (no distractions), and STOP when your time is up. What will happen? Writing will become automatic, mechanical, and less emotional – a habit!
Myth #2: I have no time to write

- **Myth**: “I can’t find time to write,” “I have too many competing obligations,” “I have too many interruptions,” or the corollary, “I can’t write unless I have a big chunk of time – I need ~4 hours.”

- **Debunking**: Of course there’s no time to write! Academic medicine has never been busier or more stressful! Is there something you find time to do every day (e.g., exercise, Starbucks, reading the news, internet surfing)? Why not writing? Important: you need less time than you think. Can’t find 30 minutes? How about 10?

- **Suggestions**: (1) Because time is so precious, we’re tempted to multi-task. Don’t - it kills your focus; (2) Delegate if possible (is a co-author really good at ___? Triage!); (3) Schedule *your* priorities (proactive) vs. Prioritizing your schedule (reactive) – schedule daily writing; (4) Review your calendar. Track your time for a week - is your time and effort aligned with your life mission?
Franklin Covey’s Time Management Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Urgent (MANAGE)</th>
<th>Not Urgent (FOCUS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis, Medical emergencies, Pressing problems, Deadline-driven projects, Last-minute preparations for scheduled activities</td>
<td>Preparation/planning, Prevention, Values clarification, Exercise, Relationship-building, True recreation/relaxation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quadrant of Necessity</td>
<td>Quadrant of Quality &amp; Personal Leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>III (AVOID)</th>
<th>IV (AVOID)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interruptions, some calls, Some mail &amp; reports, Some meetings, Many “pressing” matters, Many popular activities</td>
<td>Trivia, busywork, Junk mail, Some phone messages/email, Time wasters, Escape activities, Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quadrant of Deception</td>
<td>Quadrant of Waste</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DANGER!
Tyranny of the urgent
Conspiracy of interruption
Barrier #3: I have trouble starting

• **Barrier:** “I don’t know how to ______,” “I’ve been putting off the ______ because I hate that part.” Corollary: “I spent all my time on the ______ because I love that part.”

• **Demystifying:** Is this your checklist: “Work on grant” “Write XYZ paper”? Of course this is an overwhelming task!

• **Suggestions:** (1) Use templates. Model your papers on a favorite author; open-up one of your/a colleague’s recent paper (in your target journal) – “save as” and edit it! Use formulas. Introduction: “In discussions of ......., a controversial issue is whether ...while some argue that...others contend that.... This is not to say that....... (Source: They Say, I Say: The moves that matter in academic writing. Graff and Birkenstein). (2) Delegate – don’t be a control freak. (3) Imaginary robot. If you tell your robot: “Finish results section” – it would say, “Does not compute.” Instead, tell the robot: “Open data file, run descriptive on final study groups, double-check ANOVA results, copy means, SDs, and p-values into table....” Result = happy robot. (4) Work flow analysis – be realistic re time management
Barrier #4: I’m not ready to start writing

• **Barrier:** *I need: more data, to run more models, to read more literature.*” Corollary: “I am stuck because I’m waiting for a co-author’s feedback.”

• **Debunking:** Are you ever REALLY “ready to write”? There’s rarely an ideal time for anything. Forget about the New Year, Mondays, the weekend - just start already!

• **Suggestions:** (1) Start writing the paper as soon as you have the idea; write throughout the process – it will help you refine your ideas; you will get more done and waste less time. Writing is not what you do AFTER you’ve figured it out, writing is HOW you figure it out. (2) Expand your definition of writing. Writing is ANY activity that directly/indirectly causes more lines to appear on your biosketch! (e.g., freewriting about an idea, reviewing notes, working on a table, entering references, writing a cover letter, reviewing a paper).
Barrier #5: I have trouble finishing

- **Barrier:** “I just want to read X more papers,” “I just want to collect a bit more data/run a few more models,” “I need to re-read it again for the umpteenth time.”
- **Demystifying:** Perfect is the enemy of good enough. Don’t let your perfectionism thwart your progress.
- **Suggestions:** Limit the amount of time and effort you expend. For example, for your literature review, decide how many articles you’ll read, from how far back, and/or for how many hours. For data collection – target sample size/date and then stop. For analysis – decide how many hours will you spend, how many models you will run. For your and your co-authors’ editing – set hour-limits and firm deadlines.
Tips to reduce stress and improve productivity (Mayo Clinic)

- Plan each day
- Prioritize your tasks
- Say no to nonessential tasks
- Delegate
- Take the time you need to do a quality job
- Break large, time-consuming tasks into smaller tasks
- Practice the 10-minute rule
- Evaluate how you’re spending your time
- Limit distractions
- Get plenty of sleep, eat a healthy diet, and exercise regularly
- Take a time mgt. course
- Take a break when needed

http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/time-management/WL00048
Myths/Barriers Recap

• There is no writing muse
• Yes, you have time to write
• Yes, you know *how* to start writing
• Yes, you are *ready* to start writing
• Yes, you can close the job!

• **Remember, writing is your job. Do your job every day.**
Adopt some WAG rules!

• **Writing is your job. Do your job every day.**
  – Expand your definition of writing
  – Prioritize writing
  – Schedule your writing (<10 mins/day)
  – Do NOT engage in unplanned binge writing
  – Start writing as soon as you have the idea
  – Robotize your writing tasks (e.g., goals v. SMART objectives)
Adopt a mantra/motto

• Writing is my job; I will do my job every day!
  – Adopt a new habit! Make your scholarly writing automatic, mechanical, routine, and mundane.

• There is nothing magical or mysterious about writing; writing is a skill and I can learn it.
Write or Write Not. There is no try.

-Yoda & WAGS
Testimonials

• “It has been an exhilarating, energizing, networking and productive experience. We plan to continue the WAG.”

• “I can’t thank you enough for these WAG groups. My group is now halfway through (5 sessions down, 5 to go), and I have never been more productive. Also, having the group to share experiences and advice has been invaluable, and the group is already talking about re-upping for another 10 weeks, to continue this momentum.”

• “Thanks for the help. …the advice and support in creating this new work habit were invaluable. I think that committing to 30 minutes a day is more than just the writing. It is a way of restricting and prioritizing your time that keeps manuscripts always on the top of your priority list instead of waiting until you have time.”

• “As for me, I am on track to have my most productive writing year ever and I would like to continue.”
Testimonial

• “This process has been one of the best and most influential things that I have done for professional development since joining ________. I can already see the impacts that it is having on my work process and productivity – and how I see myself as a scholar. I credit this process for progress on a challenging paper that is important to me but that I do not think I would otherwise have ever 'conquered' – it is now with my co-authors…I have a goal of 10 journal articles in 2014 - 5 of which I hope to first-author. The WAGGING process may make this goal a reality.

THANK YOU!!!

I have also just loved my deepening relationship with my colleagues.
“I was a member of the inaugural WAG which started in October 2013. …I felt that I spent most of my time writing, especially using the broader definitions of writing. After the first group I really noticed that although I do a lot of writing, my manuscripts are always last priority. Other writing projects have deadlines, (e.g. grants, IRB protocols, abstracts) but papers can always wait. I decided that my goal for the group would be to spend 30 minutes writing on my manuscript each day, no matter what other types of writing I did that day. I had recently completed a clinical trial and had the outcome paper to work on. I stayed very committed to this goal until Dec and had a solid first draft by the end of the group. …I submitted on _____ and received a notice that it was accepted into the top _______ journal, (impact factor of 11) …with minor revisions. Currently I have two other manuscripts in final edits that will be submitted in the coming months as first author. I also have several co-author and senior author papers that are under review. If everything goes well I could have a total of 11 publications this year.”
How can you start a WAG?

• Identify at least 3 others (limited to 4-8 people).
• Identify a weekly meeting time and place that works for all for a 10-week period.
• 1-hour weekly itinerary: 15-30-15
  – (report-outs and today’s writing goal; 30 mins. of ‘writing’; report-outs and writing goal for next 7 days)
• Get your WAG on!
References & Recommended Reading

- How to Write a Lot, by Paul Silvia (2007)
- Advice for New Faculty Members, by Robert Boice (2000)
Writing Apps & Programs
Scrivener
writeordie.com
Academicladder.com

Time Mgt. Apps & Programs
Basecamp
Focus Booster
FocusTime
MyLifeOrganized (MLO)
Pomodoro
Remember the Milk
Rescue Time
Timeful (Intelligent Time Assistance)
Toggl

WAGs Facebook Page
https://www.facebook.com/HopkinsWAGs

OFD Website
http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/fac_development

Blogs
http://getalifephd.blogspot.com/
http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/
Like WAGs on Facebook!
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