



Editorial

Six rules for writing

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1. Introduction

Donovan [1] collected ten rules of writing from the literature. Based on 30+ years of experience in scientific writing, I feel confident in improving that.

In the movie *Something About Mary* [2], the hero gives a hitchhiker a ride, who later turns out to be a serial killer. During the trip, the hitchhiker reveals his killer idea: *7 Minutes Abs*, outselling the current best-seller video called *8 Minutes Abs* by saving 1 minute. The hero upsets the killer by logically questioning what if someone would come up with *6 Minutes Abs* later.

The hero escapes the axe even without knowing the danger he is in, just to end up in a reality TV series and later almost beaten up by the police, suspecting that *he* is the serial killer.

Despite the apparent dangers of such shortcuts, I distill the rules to 6, hoping they would be even half as helpful as Donovan's 10 rules. My rules are:

- (1) Start.
- (2) Write every day.
- (3) Do it well.
- (4) Make notes.
- (5) Find inspiration.
- (6) Switch between projects.

Rule 1: start

The most difficult part is to start. I feel too tired. My leg hurts. It is rainy outside. I did a massive distance yesterday, so why should I do it again today? The sofa is so tempting. Okay, these lures were from the book *Eat and Run* [3] by the famous ultrarunner Scott Jurek, but similar excuses will appear whenever you are supposed to start writing.

The first rule is to start a new Word (or LaTeX) file **now**, not anytime later. Use whatever title comes to mind and some Section titles as placeholders. Continuing the next day will be much easier.

The following simple test can emphasize the effect of starting. Suppose a small task can be completed *today*, but there is no harm if done tomorrow. Which would be your choice:

Would you do it today or tomorrow?

Based on my experience as a supervisor, the answer gives an amazingly accurate prediction for the duration of PhD studies. Students who prefer tomorrow will take almost twice as long. It is a personality trait and hard to change, but essentially, it is about getting started.

Rule 2: write every day

This corresponds to Donovan's sixth rule: "*The way to write a book is actually to write a book*". In other words: "*If you want to write, then you will write*". It is more like a state of mind rather than concrete advice. How can we achieve this state of mind? My rule is:

Write something-every day.

When I was a PhD student, I had a simple rule: do not leave home before finishing at least one new text paragraph or one new function in my program code. It may sound like a small amount, but I was indeed more productive on many days. The key is the attitude it creates in your mind. It enhances progress, and it cumulates. My thesis was submitted after 2½ years, contrary to the official goal (4 years) or the de facto norm in those days (6+ years). The biggest contribution to this efficiency, in my view, was rule 2.

Rule 3: do it well

Getting a PhD is not a rocket science. Doing good research, however, requires significant effort. A good rule of thumb in business is to '*do it*'. To make a successful business, one must do it *better than others* [4]. In Science, my rule is:

Do it well.

No matter what you do, do it well. Quality matters. This seemingly contradicts rule 1, which asks you to do it today rather than leaving it tomorrow. We must do the things but doing them well may require multiple revisions in your writing.

There must be a balance between these two rules. One cannot continue to fine-tune forever but must learn to stop. Finding a good balance between these two rules is needed as both efficiency (do it today) and quality (do it well) are necessary also in writing.

Rule 4: make notes

This rule is rather simple:

Make notes

It is not only writing down the ideas coming into your mind but documenting everything you learn during the research. Instead of (trying to) write ready text, make quick casual notes and keep doing this entire process. Writing is not a process done after the research but an integral part of the research itself.

This corresponds to Donovan's first rule: "*Carry a notebook*". He even considered taking it to the shower [1].

You can organize your notes anytime (preferably today, not tomorrow). Add supporting material like visuals, diagrams, tables, and whatever (even preliminary) results you will come by. Write about the expected results even when actual results are not yet available. Reversing the writing later is almost trivial if the results contradict expectations. Writing it out early helps formulate the research question in your head. The final stage of writing is to convert the notes to English text, and with good notes, this can be surprisingly easy.

Rule 5: find inspiration

This is the hardest rule. It is not a rule actually but a challenge to find inspiration. The text does not start to flow just by deciding to write. Sometimes, it flows like a liquid from your mind to the paper, but rarely.

One advice is to start the day with an easier routine task to wake up your brain. Even then, I can still spend hours switching between easier tasks, emails, or just browsing the web, unable to focus on writing. Inspiration is needed, and everyone needs their own way to find it.

My inspiration for this paper came from a comedy called *Spies Like Us* [5], in which two decoy agents struggle on their road to Dushanbe. It may not be your favorite movie, but it always brings a smile to my face whenever I remember it. But how does it relate to this paper?

The answer is that the first title for this paper was *Road to PhD*. I later extracted the writing rules from the other advisory to make their own paper. The title changed accordingly. But the inspiration remains. You may also read my *Road to Dushanbe* [6] in my travel stories to feel the power of inspiration.

Rule 6: ride two horses

The 8th rule of Donovan [1] was to get away from the desk whenever you get stuck in writing. I go even further: get away from the topic.

Put the writing of the paper temporarily on hold and continue writing another paper. Switching back after a few days (or weeks) later makes the original topic feel fresh again. This method can also help to solve deadlocks in your research. To process two or more papers in parallel can be good.

The rule may feel like lousy advice when looking at Figure 1. However, the idea is not to ride both horses simultaneously but to have turns. Swapping between the projects lets your mind rest from the other. Just do not run a horse farm; keep the number of horses small. Otherwise, you turn into a wannabe circus juggler having too many balls in the air to handle.

This rule can be extended to the submission stage:

Submit and forget.

Whenever the paper is ready, submit it and move on. Checking the paper status daily would be just annoying to see how slow the review process really is. It is time to free your mind and focus on other things

You still need to follow up occasionally to see that the paper actually goes into the review process. Otherwise, it may lay idle for months (or even years) on others' desktops without any actual process; see some horror stories in this regard [7].



Figure 1. This is not the road to Dushanbe.

2. Summary

No writing rules suit everyone, but these have helped me and my students. I hope you find the rules useful no matter if you are a new PhD student or a senior in research writing who just lacks time to focus from a busy life.

Use of AI tools declaration

The author declares he has not used Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in the creation of this article.

Acknowledgments

I thank my colleagues for reviewing the paper and suggesting additions as the 7th rule: (1) Reward yourself after you accomplish even a small task – having a nap as an example; (2) Find an article you would like to have published yourself and follow; (3) Drop your phone as such distraction makes all other rules obsolete.

Conflict of interest

Pasi Fränti is an Editor-in-Chief for Applied Computing and Intelligence and was not involved in the editorial review and the decision to publish this article.

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