

Monday, May 30, 2022

Writing Rocks

During the summer months, we receive lots of questions about when to write, how to organize an unstructured day, and *how to maneuver around your resistance* -- now that you understand it better! -- on a daily basis. These are great questions! In this Monday Motivator, we'll describe our own personal system in hopes that it will give you some ideas to model, adapt, experiment with, and improve upon as you answer these important questions for yourself.

Our approach to writing has always been guided by a search for empirically-documented best practices and a spirit of experimentation. In other words, we're only willing to try writing skills and strategies that have been empirically tested and repeatedly found to be effective for most people, under most circumstances. That said, we constantly find ourselves taking strategies that generally work for most people and putting our own spin on them so they will work for us.

For example, we learned early on in our careers that daily writing, using a timer, and alternating periods of writing and rest are the keys to developing a consistent, sustainable writing practice and to increasing research productivity. But no matter what results other people get, we only believe what works for us. We just adapt what we learn with our own flavor. Over the years, we've taken those core skills and developed our own personal way of using them that is designed to address our particular forms of **resistance**. We're going to describe it to you to encourage you to experiment with best practices, illustrate how to take your own unique form of resistance into consideration, and validate those of you who like to customize the skills and strategies you learn here at the NCFDD to what works for you.

We call this system **Writing Rocks**. It's quite simple -- there are three types of writing rocks in our system: pebbles, stones, and boulders. Those terms are really just symbolic ways that I think about our writing time. The pebbles

are 15-minute blocks of writing time, the stones are larger 30-minute blocks, and a boulder is a whopping 45-minutes of uninterrupted writing time. Let us describe each in a little more detail so you can understand how they relate to our resistance.

Pebbles

Pebbles are designed to address our primary level of resistance. We don't know about you, but every morning when our writing time rolls around, we just don't wanna write! We would rather do anything -- check email, fold laundry, etc. -- than write. That's because our biggest problem with writing has always been getting started. Once we get started and get into the writing, we're just fine. We sometimes even lose track of time! So for us, the challenge is all about [working through our resistance](#) so we can get in our chairs with our fingers on the keyboard. What we do is strike a deal with ourselves. We say ***we're only going to write for 15 minutes***. For whatever reason, this feels like such a tiny amount of time that it eases any fear and anxiety. What could happen in 15 minutes? To get started, we set our timers, drop down into our writing, and keep going until the timers go off. And every day, we're freshly shocked and delighted by how much work we can get done in 15 minutes. It also helps that we typically plan easy, concrete, and discrete tasks for our first pebble of the day. When the timers go off, we stop immediately and give ourselves a 5-minute break. And here's the key: We set our timers for the break! We know it sounds odd, but our resistance can flare up during the breaks in the form of procrastination and avoidance. The timer going off tells us the break is over, and it's time to get back to work.

Stones

Once we're warmed up, we move into a longer block of writing. We call these stones, and for us, they are 30 minutes of concentrated writing, followed by a 10-minute break at the end. On most days, it's this second block of time where we get into the more intense thinking and writing work. For us, it's best if we have a **SMART** goal (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttractive,

Realistic, and Time-Framed) for that time block. An example would be: *"I will draft three ugly paragraphs of my introduction by 10:00 am."*

Now, we know our resistance quite well, and once we have the nerve to start a longer block of writing, our **resistance** ramps up into high gear, throwing anything and everything at us in rapid succession, each of which is designed to take us away (physically or mentally) from the writing task at hand. For example:

- I'm hungry.
- I'm thirsty.
- I have to pee.
- I'm cold/hot.
- I have to track down that citation right now!
- This isn't the right music for the mood. Let's go to iTunes and look for something more appropriate.
- Maybe I should email _____ to get some additional clarity on this issue.
- Here's a great idea for a completely different paper! Maybe I should write on that now instead of this boring piece in front of me.
- Maybe I should stop and go read the latest news/research on _____ before I waste time writing.

Sound familiar? We keep a pad of paper next to our keyboard and simply write down each diversionary thought as it occurs. If it's truly important, we can act on it after the 30-minute block is complete. As you can imagine, once we're done with our writing and it's time for a break, most of those seemingly urgent needs no longer feel pressing. Again, we reset the timer for a break, and we can do whatever we want until it goes off again.

Boulders

Every once in a while, we drop a 45-minute boulder (followed by a 15-minute break) into our writing routine. It's rare for several reasons: 1) big blocks of writing time activate the greatest resistance for us, 2) long writing times makes us cranky, and 3) our busy schedules rarely allow for big chunks of time to write. That said, we do occasionally have a lot to accomplish in the face of an immediate deadline, a task that could be

completed in one slightly longer writing period, or extra time in our week that can accommodate a big block of writing time.

One thing we know for sure is that boulders have a way of bringing out our inner critic. For us, longer periods of time activate a qualitatively different kind of **resistance** than we experience in shorter periods. It's uglier, it's more below-the-belt, and it's typically aimed at undermining our confidence and self-worth. In other words, when our inner critic sees a boulder in our schedule, she slams a Red Bull and comes out swinging fast and furious: *Who do you think you are? Nobody is going to publish this crap, so why bother? And even if you can fool someone into publishing it, do you really want everyone who reads it to realize how stupid and silly you are?*

Ugh! Because of our inner critic's drama, we know that the only way we'll get through a boulder is to have another human being waiting on the other side. Whether it's a call from our writing buddies, checking in with a coach, or a mid-day group chat with our **Faculty Success Program** crew, we won't make it through a concentrated 45 minutes unless we can run screaming into the presence of someone else at the end of that writing time. For us, it's both an accountability mechanism *and* a lifeline. Whoever we're talking to knows to ask us how our writing went, which also motivates us to give a positive report. With all of these requirements, you can understand why we often prefer to shoot for a pebble and a stone rather than to head straight into a giant boulder that will trigger greater and uglier forms of resistance as well as require more organized external accountability.

Needless to say, the whole reason we enjoy the image of various sizes of writing rocks is because we understand writing as a slow, long, and gradual process. For example, a book manuscript takes lots of time and sustained effort to complete a draft and you want to feel good about completing *each step of the process*, not just the end product. Imagining our daily time as writing rocks provides us with a visual image that each day matters, each day we take an important step forward, and each 15-, 30- or 45-minute writing rock contributes in a concrete way to the cumulative end product.

The thing we love most about our **Writing Rocks** is that they help us understand our time differently. Getting accustomed to writing in small

blocks means that we feel empowered to block 60 minutes out of each day knowing that we can get a lot done. We also enjoy the flexibility it gives us to choose how we will spend our 60 minutes based on how we're feeling on any given day; maybe it will be a pebble and a stone, or maybe we'll go straight in for a boulder. And finally, having varying sizes of writing blocks means we can write *anytime* we have even as little as 15 minutes.

We frequently hear that the specificity and detail that we provide in our NCFDD materials are helpful to imagining what might work for YOU! We've described our **Writing Rocks** as a way to stimulate your thinking, so now it's time to ask yourself: *What is my current writing process? Is it working for me? Do I have realistic expectations? Have I tried short bursts of writing, or do I assume that writing requires long and agonizing hours at a time in front of the computer?*

The Weekly Challenge

This week, we challenge you to:

- Write every day for at least 30 minutes (in whatever configuration of pebbles, stones, and boulders suit your fancy).
- Ask yourself: What is the relationship between the length of my writing time and my resistance?
- If you don't know the answer, try tracking your resistance and your writing time this week.
- Once you observe your own patterns of resistance, try experimenting with different blocks of writing time and accountability mechanisms to see what works for you.

We hope this week brings each of you a spirit of experimentation, a sense of curiosity about your own patterns, and tremendous creativity in adapting your daily writing to your own unique needs.

Warmly,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore, PhD

Founder, [NCFDD](#)

Anthony Ocampo, PhD

Academic Director, [NCFDD](#)

Upcoming Training

The Teaching Toolkit Program: a 4-week program for designing, refreshing, and launching courses

7/11/22 - 8/5/22

Registration closes on June 3!

[Register Here](#)

14-Day Writing Challenge: an opportunity to experiment with daily writing, online community, and supportive accountability

6/20/22 - 7/3/22

Registration closes on June 15!

[Register Here](#)

Core Curriculum Webinar: Moving from Resistance to Writing

6/9/2022 (Thursday) 2:00-3:30 pm ET

Facilitator: Mindi Thompson, PhD, University of Wisconsin - Madison

[Register Here](#)

Guest Expert Webinar: Rising Above Burnout

6/21/2022 (Tuesday) 2:00-3:00 pm ET

Facilitator: Kristin Croyle, PhD, State University of New York at Oswego

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