



Notes for Authors



Making Academic Writing a Habit

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Abstract: Writing is hard work for many academic scientists, but it can be transformed into a more palatable task with a little thought, practice and planning. Writing should form a central component of your research effort; do not divorce it from your core activities. I suggest five behaviours that may make writing more endurable: write regularly, if only a paragraph a day; vary what you write, such as research papers, books reviews and conference abstracts; have an annual target for your productivity; work with productive co-authors; and discover the more efficient journals in which to publish. Writing and publishing ensures that your observations and ideas will contribute to your area of expertise in the future.

I am writing this article on a whim and I hope I can maintain an idiosyncratic air throughout; you are my judge. I retired over five years ago and I have retained my enthusiasm for the geological sciences. In my proto-dotage, I confess to enjoying scientific writing in a way that was scarcely imaginable when I was younger. My memories of those days suggest that writing was a hard slog. But things changed with time. For example, over 40 years ago, writing my PhD thesis was a Great Wall of China of a project – it rose up before me, impenetrable, monolithic, but nonetheless a task that had to be dealt with of necessity. And it was. It helped me to write science as a habit. Ahead of me were books and monographs to be written and/or edited, and always one more research paper, book review or conference abstract to write. It was the life in geological research that I craved from the beginning and enjoyed throughout. If writing was tough, then I faced it head-on as part of my research effort and did more than was required.

Yet I'm retired, so why do I keep writing? For the simple reason that, after many years, I found writing about geology to be fun. So, I just keep on having fun. It is a habit that gives me pleasure.

This preamble defines something of my philosophy of academic publishing. You know what I do, and how and why I do so. But let's turn the lens through 180°. What about you? I am always distressed that academic research and academic publishing are considered separate disciplines by some, perhaps many. Whatever the research, if it is not published, then it does not exist within its discipline. It remains undisclosed by the investigator, not widely known at all and, essentially, kept a secret from the wider scientific community. I fail to understand why.

When I was a research student in the early 1980s, such attitudes were possibly more widespread. There were still ex-students who would say that they had completed the research for a thesis without writing it up. No thesis, no degree. So, what was the point of the research if it was to remain unrecorded? Such 'scholars' always seemed to develop an individual slant to explain their failure to write. One I knew would not write a thesis until having filled ten field notebooks. After this the yjesis was still not produced. What was the point of it? Another I knew was forming a consultancy company which, to my knowledge, never got off the ground. And so on.

I must conclude that there is a mental state where writing to a purpose – a thesis and obtaining the research degree that was the original point of the exercise – is too frightening a task, whereas engaging in geology to no purpose – writing no thesis – placates the student. In the absence of a thesis the field notebooks or whatever can be presented as evidence of the candidate's industry, however ridiculously misdirected.

Nowadays, I am not obligated to produce publications apart from for my own satisfaction. This is a factor in my continued productivity; nobody is in charge, except me (Donovan, 2018, 2024). In truth, I enjoy guiding my own research and publishing endeavours. My decisions are entirely mine, with no annual report to deliver at the end.

I have been thinking about what I can suggest to help you publish both more successfully and more frequently. As a first step I recommend five possible behaviours that might engender good publishing habits. Not all of them will suit all authors, but some, at least, could be just what you need (see also Donovan, 2011, and 2017, pp.171–174). Further, I claim no great originality for my suggestions; in one form or another, most have been suggested before. But they have worked for me.

Write regularly, if only a paragraph a day. Hardly an original idea, but one that can be acted upon whatever the circumstances. Keep a notebook and pen/pencil in your pocket for the odd five minutes, wherever and whenever, when you might be able to scribble an idea or two. A colleague used to say write a page per day, at the end of a year you will have a book. True, but I am not suggesting anything more than a research paper. Yet a month of paragraphs will propel you closer to a complete paper; 30 paragraphs will break the back of most writing projects (except books). People do not write because they would rather make lame excuses (Silvia, 2007; Donovan, 2017, pp.179–181), but writing a paragraph does not require a major commitment of time. A paragraph every day is a small obligation that can pay big dividends. If you still have a lame excuse for not writing, do not come crying to me. To quote the inestimable Silva (2007, p.46), "*Saying that you can't write because of writer's block is merely saying that you can't write because you aren't writing. It's trivial. The cure ... is writing.*" Listen to the oracle.

Vary what you write – research papers, books reviews and conference abstracts, for example. Sometimes, writing an extended document can be wearing and a change of academic scenery is in order. Do not just stop writing, but temporarily change direction. Do stop writing that big research paper for now and pen something completely different, but shorter. (For example, Donovan and Paul (1985) was a diversion into a different subject while I was writing my PhD on fossil crinoids in 1983.) If you are reading a new and interesting book on your area of expertise, then write a book review; editors commonly welcome such unsolicited reviews. If you plan to attend a conference and contribute, then write your abstract or, better, two abstracts (a talk and a poster). If none of these entices you, then what will? You are allowed to use your own intelligence, experience and imagination at this point. Varying what you write can keep you fresh.

Have an annual target for your productivity. This works for some and not for others. A plan is a good thing providing it guides your endeavours, yet there are those who will make it an excuse to talk about productivity while remaining unproductive. I make a careful mental note of everything I might submit and publish during a calendar year without being too predictive on 01 January. Yet in any research post your HoD will want to know your plans. Make them both concrete and attainable as necessary.

Work with productive co-authors. There are co-authors and co-authors (Donovan, 2017, pp.105–108). You will find some will work for their recognition and others will expect it as a right. Encourage the first group and dump the second. Co-authors who are too important to contribute are not important enough to include. I had a work colleague with whom I might have published. Our interests were complementary, but hearing what happened with some of his other projects and his attitude to them was enough to discourage me. He seemed pleased to outline his collaborative disasters, even in his PhD thesis, and yet he was the one common factor in all of them.

Discover the more efficient journals in which to publish and, conversely, identify those slow journals to avoid. Be impatient to see your research papers in print. It once took a leading journal in my field six months to reject a short note of mine. I got a strong impression that the editor made his mind up and just wanted a couple of reviewers to agree with him, which they did in a half-hearted way. The journal in question has not been in receipt of many papers from me for the past 30 years. Yet the paper was published, elsewhere, in a journal that subsequently received many of my papers.

I do not think that any of the suggestions above sounds like too much hard work, yet, potentially, each may propel your academic endeavours forward. My mantra is not to sweat blood, but I do think that a little – I repeat, a little – and often is the underlying message. Plus make good decisions; move on from your non-productive co-authors and shun the unfriendly journals no matter how well both are thought of.

Let others encourage them, the fools. If you need to spend a day binge-writing every so often, then do so, but do not stop doing the simple things, too. A paragraph per day for a month will be more productive than twelve hours of a caffeine-induced frenzy.

In the final analysis, the more you write, the more will writing feel comfortable. It is a simple correlation. So, what is my point? It boils down to please publish and don't perish. Enjoy doing it. Write and discover what there is to appreciate in writing; I have. Write and publish whether it is a career obligation or just for fun. Find the journals that you like and who like you, and publish in them; make it a habit. In short, write and record your observations and ideas, preserving them for posterity; whatever, do not let them get lost like an unwritten PhD, but contribute. I look forward to reading your next paper.

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Notes for Authors



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Abstract: You have just finished writing your latest paper, so where do you submit it for possible publication? The choice may be obvious or there might be several titles that fit the bill and each with a high profile. For any paper, choose the best journal to which to submit, but have a backup 'batting order' for submission, in case your initial submission is unsuccessful. Know your field. By all means submit papers to a favourite journal, but also spread your publications across a range of relevant titles.

Writing in science invariably has a purpose. It might be as simple as scribbles in a field notebook or a record of procedures in the laboratory. Either of these might be regarded as the starting point for your next research paper. Gather your data, make notes, develop these into sentences, paragraphs, eventually a complete document. I am glib, making it sound too easy (it isn't). The author needs to appreciate the nuances of the many aspects of academic writing (Donovan, 2017).

One aspect of academic publishing absorbed almost subcutaneously by most academics is where to publish. They know the leading journals in their subject area and ensure their contributions appear in them. For example, paper X is a contribution to subject Y. Contributions to Y might appear in a range of generalist and specialist journals. All may be worthy and the author must decide where their paper would fit most successfully, and be noticed by those who need to see them (remembering that your paper may, after all, be rejected).

Of course, I am not telling you where to publish; this is your decision. I cannot even help with an informed recommendation as I do not know your particular area of study. But there are relevant comments that may be of general applicability. Thody (2006, pp. 215–216) sensibly suggested that authors should aim for high-profile journals that are peer reviewed and are read by academics in your field. Also aim for publication in those journals with a wide readership. And "If rejected, you recycle down"; I know that I do. There is no sense in a rejected paper collecting dust in a drawer. Murray (2009, p. 37) hit the nail on the head in pointing out "You have to research the journals ..."; of course you do. Do not publish blind. Whatever, "... think first of [your] audience and the purpose of [your] communication" (Hartley, 2008, p. 138); your paper will likely fail to make an impact unless it is read by the target audience.

If you are working in a university, museum or similar research institution, chances are that your bosses expect you to submit to journals with a high profile, with a high scientific citation index (SCI) or satisfying similar metrics. There is certainly sense in this because both the author and the institution will benefit from the enhanced profile afforded to SCI journals. This scenario is familiar to many of you, I am sure. What I would like to explore are alternatives to this 'one publishing fits all' strategy.

A quick aside. I am assuming that your target journal loves your paper and wants to publish it. But what if it does not? In the words of Douglas Adams (2017, p.26, for example), "*Don't Panic*". Rejection is part of publication. See Donovan (2025) for my comments and ideas. Trust that some journal – after all, there are so many of them – is waiting to publish your paper.

This might sound like a glib comment, but consider the facts. In response to my bald query to the World Wide Web (www), "*How many academic journals are there?*", I got a response of 46,000 and growing [<https://publishingstate.com>]; others suggested yet more. How much choice do you need?

Obviously, most of these will be specialist journals completely irrelevant to your own interests, but not all. (It is a whim that will never be satisfied, but I would love to publish in the specialised medical journal with the euphonious title *Gut*.) You will probably know most or all of the alternatives. They will vary from those with stringent peer review policies to the more relaxed to those where the editor alone is judge, jury and executioner (Donovan, 2011).

Comments made by peer reviewers are, I trust, constructive and will likely help you to improve your paper, however good was your initial submission. If your paper has a positive review, these comments can propel you towards publication in your target journal. If your paper is rejected, constructive comments will help you to improve the submission (Donovan, 2025). At this stage, you have two jobs to undertake: improve your paper in the light of the reviewer’s comments; and target a new journal that will accept your resubmission. But which journal?

You would be a strange author if you did not already have a ‘batting order’ of preferred places to publish even before your initial submission. We all have places where we like to publish, such as *Cave and Karst Science*. But, for example, *Cave and Karst Science* may reject your paper; if it concerns, for example, karst geomorphology, then you need to seek suitable alternatives among the karst journals. To these may be added generalist journals in your study area, such as those that deal with geomorphology *sensu lato*, or geographically regional journals. Whatever, you have choices, so choose wisely.

I do not recommend resubmitting rejected, but revised, papers to the journal that first vetoed it unless encouraged to do so by the editor. Yet there are many other relevant journals to which you can send the revised paper and where it will not have a history. I have resubmitted to journals after rejection, but I needed to know that the resubmission was wanted. On one occasion I did so, thinking resubmission was encouraged, only to discover that the journal did not accept such ‘repaired’ papers; the editor’s rejection letter was ambiguous. It was a chastening experience and said journal has never received another paper from me.

Where to publish is a simple choice, for me at least. But I am out of the loop; in retirement I submit my papers where I like, not where the policy of an institution dictates. I subscribe to about half a dozen society journals, and most of these appear in

both hard and electronic copy. For preference, I publish mainly in them. I love to receive a printed journal through the letterbox and curl up with it. You cannot do that with online-only journals that, in truth, are not published for relaxed neo-amateurs like me; they are there for the professionals. Most of my target journals also publish some form of Gold Open Access for free, another influential plus point. My old age pension does not exist to fill the purses of shareholders of the big publishers. And in case one of my papers is not widely available, I am quick to respond to requests for pdfs.

Thus, where to publish has become a more personal choice. I like this. Coincidentally, my retirement coincided with the move to electronic-only publication of certain of my favourite journals to which I had both subscribed and submitted papers – even edited – for many years. In the absence of a hard copy, my separation from these journals was two-fold; I not only stopped subscribing to them, but I also stopped publishing in them. I feel sure that my views are in a minority, but they are my views.

But this move away from old favourite titles is positive in some ways. I have always recognised and supported the smaller journals produced by museums and small societies in addition to those of the big publishing houses. The latter are always popular with high citation indices, and receive enough submissions that editors can pick and choose what to publish. In contrast, the smaller journals have less submissions and less room for editorial manoeuvrability (Donovan, 2011). Today, I submit my best papers to these smaller journals, supporting their publication effort.

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An explanation...

During 2025 a “*Note for Authors*” was misfiled and (worse) temporarily overlooked within the *Cave and Karst Science* editorial “system”. Perhaps poetically, its title was “*Things we all forget (sometimes)*”! The outcome is that two *Notes* are published above. For the benefit of readers who might wish to read or re-read the comments and tips offered within this series, the Table below lists the *Notes* to date – including (for completeness) one topic (red text) that was republished to help explain and emphasize the purpose and value of abstracts and conclusions.

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