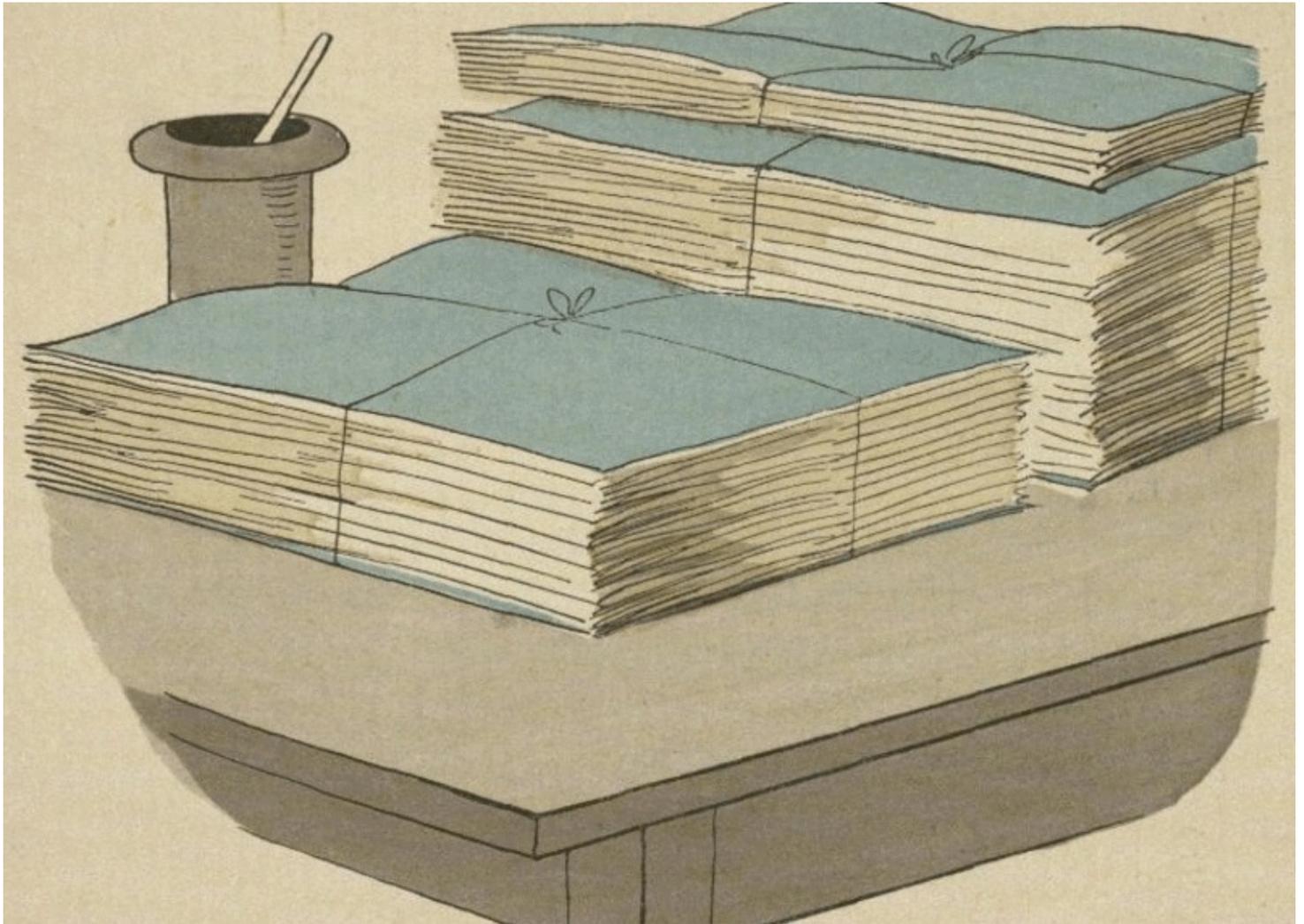


# The Early Career Academic: Your First Sabbatical

[chroniclevitae.com/news/1850-the-early-career-academic-your-first-sabbatical](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1850-the-early-career-academic-your-first-sabbatical)



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*Image:* by Franz Bonn. Munich: Braun & Schneider, 1888.

Nine months ago I was annoyingly posting weekly countdowns on Facebook because I was so excited at the prospect of taking my first sabbatical. Now that it's (sadly) nearing its end, I'm feeling good about what I've accomplished but there are a few things I wish I'd known that would've helped me better plan my "early sabbatical."

Before I share my lessons learned, I want to define and describe "early sabbatical" — sometimes called a "pretenure leave" or "pretenure sabbatical." It's a semester-long leave granted to assistant professors after a successful third-year review. Not all institutions offer pretenure sabbaticals so if yours does, be thankful. Early sabbaticals have multiple goals. Most notably, they are an opportunity to ensure you are on track to submit a successful tenure file in two to three years. To do so, an early sabbatical should meet the following four goals.

**Goal No. 1: Start fixing what they told you needs fixing.** This might be the most important way to use your early sabbatical. Your goal is to make sure the tenure committee has evidence that you've read, reflected on, and acted upon the feedback from your third-year review.

Even in the case of a positive review, you should use the sabbatical to strengthen what you're already doing well.

For example, I was commended for the diverse assessments and learning materials in my courses but instead of patting myself on the back, I reviewed my syllabi to ensure that was true of every class I teach. In some ways I had been experimenting with different course structures so now that I know what works, I will stick with that.

Despite an overall positive review, I also had areas for improvement. Most notably, I needed to find some coherence in my research because I'd been publishing in a variety of fields. I created a timeline of my scholarly goals including books, articles, conferences, and, most of all, topical areas of interest. Refining and revising this document allowed me to write a research statement that guided my sabbatical work. Further, I can include this research statement in my tenure portfolio so that's one less thing to do when the time comes.

**Goal No. 2: Strengthen your scholarship.** This is probably how most people utilize their early sabbatical. You can finally get that book project done, start that new line of research, or just catch up on the recent developments in your field (while keeping an eye out for potential external reviewers for tenure).

More important, you can evaluate how you are positioning yourself as a scholar. Are you researching what you want to research? Are you writing about issues that are personally meaningful? Can this line of work sustain an academic career? An early sabbatical is when you should design your long-term research agenda.

Because I am at a teaching institution, most faculty spend the first two to three years (re)designing courses and figuring out how to manage such a teaching-intensive schedule. It is not uncommon for us to completely stall in our research. My top priority for my early sabbatical was to establish a strong research agenda that is compatible with my teaching schedule. I published a book just before beginning my sabbatical, but I still needed to get at least two more articles published, have two under review and start two new studies. Meeting those goals would mean I was on track to exceed tenure requirements, and indeed, I am. I was able to publish two articles and a book chapter, get a third article under review, start two new studies, and co-edit an anthology.

**Goal No. 3: Enhance your teaching.** Most academics don't even consider their teaching when planning how to use a precious sabbatical. But even at R1 institutions, teaching should not be ignored. In an environment where students are becoming increasingly vocal about the quality of their courses, we should always be attentive to how well we are meeting students' (and institutional) expectations.

This is a perfect time to design the course you wish you'd been able to take as a student, or to add interesting elements (e.g., a field trip or guest speakers) to existing courses. You might also observe other faculty members as they teach — especially at different institutions — to generate ideas for how to improve your own classroom practices.

You might also need to alter the courses you teach to add breadth or depth to your portfolio. If you mostly teach lower-level courses, design a senior seminar. If you teach mostly majors, consider designing a course that meets general-education requirements. This process will allow you to rewrite your teaching statement to reflect your recent experiences. That document — like your research statement — should be included in your tenure portfolio and provide evidence of self-inquiry and an understanding of the importance of teaching in your professional role.

**Goal No. 4: Get some rest, and have a little fun.** Start your sabbatical by decompressing. Take at least two weeks to not work. You aren't used to not having to go to campus, so you will have to structure your days differently.

Design your sabbatical schedule to include downtime. There is no need to work 8 hours a day, every day. There is no need to sit at your desk until you reach your 300-words-a-day goal. After facing graduate school, a tough faculty job market, and then three years of adjusting to a tenure-track position, you are mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted. You now have at least six months of 24-hour days to accomplish your goals. It's OK to binge watch *House of Cards* for a day or two.

Along the same lines, early sabbatical is an opportunity to enhance your personal life. Spend time with family and friends. Reconnect with folks you've been meaning to call but haven't because you don't have time before 10 p.m. If

you're single, start dating. You might actually be able to enjoy watching a movie or having a dinner conversation without worrying about that tall stack of papers waiting to be graded. If you're in a committed relationship, recommit to your partner: Go on dates. Take a trip together. Rebuild your relationship's foundations, which may have crumbled a bit while you were frantically getting started on the tenure track.

Once you have a work schedule, be sure to intersperse your work with fun activities. Take that cooking class you've been interested in for years. See the exhibit you've been meaning to check out. A sabbatical is not just about professional development, it's also for personal development. I took an Italian class to kick off sabbatical. While I stopped my lessons three months into sabbatical, I still give myself credit for trying to do something unrelated to work.

So what would I have done differently?

The one thing I wish someone had told me nine months ago was how incredibly anxious I would be about getting work done. With each passing month, the pressure increased because the sabbatical was closer to being over, yet my workload didn't seem to be decreasing.

I really lost it when I remembered that I have to send scholarship samples to external reviewers in June of 2018 — four months before my tenure file is due. That means that if I don't have articles submitted to journals by September of 2017, it is unlikely that the manuscripts will be "accepted" by June 2018, given how long the journal-review process takes.

So I am giving you fair warning: No matter how much you get done on sabbatical, you will never feel like you accomplished enough, fast enough. To minimize the anxiety, I suggest the following:

- **Be realistic about how much work you can get done.** If you have a semester-long sabbatical, even after you add on the weeks for winter and summer breaks, you still won't have enough time to write a book, finish four articles, attend three international conferences, and start a nonprofit. Create a work schedule for the full sabbatical, for each month, and then for each week. Don't be tied to that schedule — adjust it as necessary because life happens and having unrealistic expectations of yourself inevitably leads to failure, anxiety, and guilt.
- **Extend your sabbatical.** In the year preceding your leave, consider applying for fellowships that you can use to add time onto your sabbatical. Early career fellowships are offered by the [Andrew W. Mellon Foundation](#), the [Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation](#), and the [National Institutes of Health](#), among many others. Most colleges and universities encourage faculty to find outside fellowships because that increases the prestige of the institution. In choosing fellowships, check their length, pay, and location. And be certain your institution will support your acceptance of a fellowship should you be awarded one.
- **Don't cut yourself off completely.** Senior professors will advise you to disconnect from the campus and the department while on sabbatical. On one hand, you should indeed use this time to focus on yourself — you have to do everything you can to make sure your tenure review will be successful in a couple of years. On the other hand, if you choose to ignore work emails, be prepared to be out of the loop when you return.

The department and institution keep functioning despite your absence. It is feasible that your department might change the requirements of the major, hire a new colleague, move into a new building, or decide your future teaching schedule — all without your input. Before you go on sabbatical, communicate to your chair the extent to which you want to stay abreast of departmental happenings, and the depth to which you will be involved in decision-making during your leave. Otherwise, the default is that the chair will not contact you, and you will have to accept whatever changes were made while you were not responding to meeting requests or other emails.

In that way, sabbatical is a tricky thing. You have to find a way to disconnect from the work environment while remaining engaged with the work. For academics, that can be extremely difficult because we tend to be all-or-

nothing type people. But an early sabbatical marks the transition from “new faculty member” to “faculty member,” so use the time to celebrate your accomplishments and to affirm your ability to successfully navigate the remainder of the tenure track.