

Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics

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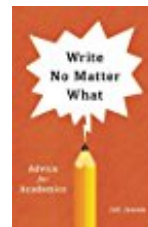
Author(s): Joli Jensen

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Most, if not all, faculty and graduate students will agree with Dr. Joli Jensen's statement that "academic writing is a perplexing burden, a source of constant anxiety, self-doubt, and confusion" (p. 4). When we and our colleagues discuss our own writing struggles or those of our graduate students, we recognize that there are many potential issues underlying writing problems: research design issues, lack of knowledge of other scholarly literature, underdeveloped academic writing skills, an emerging identity as an academic writer, and ineffective writing processes and practices. Jensen, the author of *Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics*, claims that her book focuses solely on "offering academic colleagues process-oriented strategies for overcoming writing obstacles" (p. 88). In fact, we find that Jensen offers more than just process strategies in that she also details the affective and psychological barriers to writing; the things that happen in writers' heads when they have carved out time for writing but still struggle.



The book is organized into 28 chapters, or mini-workshops, on being an academic writer. In *Part I: Writing in Academe*, Jensen acknowledges that although writing is the primary work by which academics are measured, the structures of academia do not support a writing life. Instead, scholars need to treat their writing as a craft in which we "gather and deploy effective tools" (p. 10). These tools are the focus of *Part II: Using Tools that Work*: three "taming" techniques that keep a project in perspective (and in progress). Many of these tools will be familiar to readers of Paul J. Silvia's (2007) *How to Write a Lot*, such as securing a space for writing that works for you and blocking out time in your schedule to write. However, Jensen lays out these tools in more detailed steps, many of which resonated with us, such as keeping a reverse planner to understand how we spend our time and scheduling writing time when we have the most energy, during what she calls "A time" (p. 32). Her charge—to have daily contact with an important project—has become our own writing group's mantra since reading this book.

Jensen uses *Part III: Challenging Writing Myths* to debunk common narratives we tell ourselves that keep us from making progress with our writing, even when employing the tools from Part II. By naming these common (perhaps universal) narratives, Jensen takes away their power and gives readers counternarratives to combat ideas such as needing to write a masterpiece, being an imposter, comparing ourselves to others, or anticipating hostile readers. *Part IV: Maintaining Momentum* provides strategies for keeping with writing projects in their various phases,

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strategies which help writers recognize why (and if) projects still matter to them and how to move forward in the face of critical feedback. We appreciated the advice to listen for the “lilt” in our voices when talking about our work which signals that we really care about a project; we also appreciated the advice about when to leave a toxic project behind. Jensen also addresses how best to use the unstructured time of breaks, summers, and sabbaticals to both write productively and rest and rejuvenate. The last section, *Part V: Building Writing Support*, provides suggestions for participating in a faculty writing group focused on writing process rather than content.

Jensen’s suggestions resonated with us as writers, but they resonated less with us as scholars. While Jensen is clearly an experienced writer and writing mentor, directing the Faculty Writing Center at the University of Tulsa, the book reads as personal advice, disconnected from the scholarship on effective time management and writing habits. While the book contains a bibliography, Jensen’s “advice for academics” is not concretely connected to research. As academics, we like to know how advice is bolstered by research, and vice versa.

In addition, some of the suggestions and examples she offers will strike newer professors as out of touch with the way we really work, connect, and collaborate in 2018. For example, she recommends keeping a physical box with all the papers associated with a project in it and “opening the box” each day. This can easily be done digitally with tools like Dropbox, but she refers frequently to a physical box. Perhaps relatedly, Jensen discusses writing as a primarily solo task. Although opportunities for collaborative writing vary from field to field, we are writing this book review together because we do our best writing and thinking in collaboration with others, and the proliferation of digital tools that Jensen leaves out of the book help foster that collaboration. For example, to write this review, we exchanged emails containing our ideas and outlines, then moved the conversation into a shared Google document where we could both edit and see one another’s work instantly. We continued a meta-conversation about the book in an email conversation. Collaboration and the use of technology is the norm in many fields today and prompts many other writing process dilemmas; for example, how to split up writing a research manuscript, how to co-author with students, how to organize and share information with long-distance colleagues, and how to build and sustain a collaboration over multiple projects. Guidance about forming, sustaining, and enjoying writing collaborations, as well as about how best to use the tools available to support that work, strikes us as a crucial missing piece in this book.

The strength of *Write No Matter What* lies in how Jensen emphasizes the need to focus our time and energy on work that we believe in and enjoy; otherwise, it becomes easy to focus on ourselves rather than on our work and mistake our negative self-messages for reality. Jensen is right that this is no way to make a career. The most valuable service she offers is, as Shakespeare might describe it, giving “a local habitation and a name” (5.1.18) to each of our inchoate fears about our work, our abilities, and our writing that crowd out its meaning. In this way, Jensen’s book takes us a step further than similar books, going beyond advice about practical time management, organization, and motivational techniques to address the psychological aspects of writing. She identifies how fears about hostile readers, for example, can disguise themselves as procrastination or impenetrable prose. The

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analogy of writer-as-craftsman, which she uses throughout the book, is a helpful way of reminding us that our writing is our work, not our whole selves.

Though she discusses writing groups in only one chapter, we think the book is ideal reading material for writing groups because it provides a common language for supporting one another and identifying each other's roadblocks. It is particularly useful for early career academics who have recently committed to turning academic writing into a career. As Annie Dillard (1989) says, "how we spend our days, is, of course, how we spend our lives" (p. 32). We need to spend our days writing, and we hope to enjoy productive, fulfilling lives as well. This book will help us do both.

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