

A Neurodivergent Writing Guide

Premise

Writing is hard for neurodivergent people. But it's mostly hard because no one teaches us how to write OUR WAY

Context

What makes writing hard. What makes writing instruction fail neurodivergent writers

The View From the First-Year Writing Professor

- Most US public schooling focuses on writing for testing
- High school teachers struggle with limited time, excessive demands, so fall back on streamlined strategies for neurotypical students
- In college, a one-semester writing requirement in the first year is burdened with All The Things
- Working with sources is reduced to Don't Plagiarize

Substantiate

Could you tell us about the webinars?

What do you want to say about the webinars?

Talk about how we wrote this document - collaboration on a shared doc

Talk about why a document like this might help others - it shares lived experience

Common Struggles for Neurodivergent Writers and What to Do About it

How make fingers go word?

- Blank page
 - write a purposely bad version - bonus points if it makes you laugh
 - Use mind-mapping or other programs before getting into An Actual Draft? Or scaffold by adding headings to An Intentionally Crummy Draft.
 - come to the page with a couple of questions you can copy-and-paste onto the page (if electronic dictation/writing) so you can join a conversation
 - write down words, color them, order them, move the words around until more words come up, use other fonts

- write what comes out of my mouth and change that until it feels like something that would be written (and maybe more friendly)
- Write for a timed session with no editing - pomodoro style

•Task initiation

- Use analog materials.
 - I like writing with pen and paper to let my thoughts free-flow and then type up my writing. Sometimes I will take these to other venues to write or take with me to jot down notes as I'm inspired (meaning my brain will jump to my topic and phrase something how I like and want to address in my writing)
 - Alluded to elsewhere, but this makes drawing visual cues a lot easier. (I could provide a picture or two as an example if allowed)
- write on paper or other less distracting thing
- Start writing from the middle instead of the beginning or end
- voice-to-text brain dump
- Seek writing buddies to body double
- Set deadlines/goals with a writing/working/parallel play partner for solidarity - even if the goals are different
- Take a brisk walk around the block, then write.
- Converting abstract high level concepts to words
 - If this can't be done readily, try changing the thought into another form that might be easier to change into words. (Ex.: Thought of sound -> Thought of image -> Thought in words; Thought of concept -> Application of concept -> Write "How did I apply it?")

Pacing

• Concerns about consistency

•Chunking

- Dedicate a 3-hour chunk (or X amount of time) on Y day of the week, and unplug from everything else during that time. Admins can wait. Students can wait.

•Habit forming

- Try weaving a session into another pre-existing routine (eg. Try to write a paragraph every other day after getting ready to sleep.)
- If inspiration hits abruptly rather than accumulating slowly, having something to write on in the moment can help (eg. bring a notepad along on something that tends to start thoughts)

•Preventing "goblin binge mode"

unable to move on from planning/redoing same outline over and over

- Pick a section of the outline and use the fractal method to further outline that one.
 - this is part of the pre-writing process that you can build out
- Accepting that starting from scratch/ or redoing will sometimes be less work in the long run vs trying to work with a dysfunctional piece of writing

Managing distractions

- Music (but it is usually instrumental and no words)
- Let the 'procrastination cleaning happen
- "and/or try to understand why it's happening and decide if you want it to still happen."
- Pomodoro technique (or channeling my hyperfocus)
- In ADHD circles this is sometimes called "body doubling". Use search to find a group online.
- Medicate (coffee, chocolate, meds if you like that).
- Co-work independently with a friend on zoom (turn off cam/audio if desired). Set time to check in.
- Co-work with a friend in person
- leave phone at home/in car
- Work outside of my home (library, coffeeshop, can be a less distracting environment)
- I'm more motivated to work when I have the deadline of the closing hours of the venue
- Bring noise-canceling headphones, ideally
- Partial sound blocking ear plugs (ex: Loop 'Engage')
- (For some people) Get comfy. Getting to a place where I'm comfortable and warm enough to not want to move for a while can occasionally help me write without distraction (perhaps on the couch, blanket over my legs).

How to write without existential crisis

- Establish my own goals for intrinsic motivation and pressure
- Figure out why you want to do it and how
- Tell someone friendly your date goal (peer group, weekly mastermind?)
- Remind yourself that your writing does not have to Change The World—it can do a tiny bit to build the conversation
- Figure out whether there's an unanswered question that is making a crisis likely. Can you answer the question? Or can you proceed without answering the question? (Can you help to write a better question?)
- Talk to yourself as you would talk to your favorite students [maybe this goes under "with"?]

How to write *with* existential crisis

- Be aware of your body. What is it telling you as you write? Can you use it to fuel your thoughts, or do you really need to take a break?
- It is ok to take a break even if you did not accomplish much—pushing your self when your body/mind is done is not helpful and leads to long term burnout

- (Requires OneNote workalike or loose paper) If using body-as-fuel method, it can help to draw the emotion near the paragraph being written.
- What if what you're writing about feels unimportant next to global crisis?
- Give yourself space to be unimportant for a minute +1
- Trust yourself and your contribution
- Try to, with humility and grace, connect your work to the global struggle for liberation

How to write and overcome the fear of perfection?

- It can help to use a separate file/notebook specifically for roughs or work that will be thrown out eventually. This can help set a less formal tone.
 - In physical journaling, I use black covers for ones I want to keep, greens for ones I intend to throw out.
 - In formal work, a separate less-formatted (or over-formatted) file for "scratch" can serve a similar purpose.
- It can help to write up top – FAST, BAD, WRONG, and that's fine. Even the greats are sometimes bad.
 - Another thing that helps is to do a "writing warm up" ; e.g., "I am sitting down and writing about the CHI paper that is due in 2 days. I am experiencing fear and that is fine"-- keep the activity going till you feel the anxiety lessen and start the actual writing. I have found that it helps to slip into the paper writing easier.

•Communication

- Brevity
- Structure
 - Powerpoint - it can be a container to hold a variety of representations
- Flow
- Actually making the point vs giving supporting details and expecting the readers to just understand

How make hyperfix go stop

- •Getting stuck in the details
- •Feeling unable to move on
- •Trapped in background literature

- set times where I'm not allowed to look up related work. if I write a sentence that feels like it needs it, use fillers like XXX% of people do XXX as cited in XXX. I can then decide if I need that section/sentence to decide if I need to find the work for it
- create trash section. makes edits/deletion feel less committed. can always go back to trash if really need it (This can be referred to as 'cutting room floor' so it is easier to put aside for those who might struggle with trash)
 - If changing Trash/NotTrash context is a problem, use a separate file/program/media for the trash section.

How edit/revise when rather die?

- Use text to speech or voice over to read to you and edit as you go
 - Read the document out loud
- How to vary language/ word usage when spelling is difficult so only the few same words pop into your head
 - Not surefire, but: Varying rhythm can sometimes help do this subconsciously. (eg. Every sentence begins with "I... Then I...", try adding a "This led me to..." or a "... which had me ..." every so often if possible.)
- Print the document and edit with pen and paper +1
 - Similar if using computer: Comment on your own work as you go, don't need to use the formal comment tool (but it does help differentiate)
- Roleplay as someone reading your paper (use *masking* to your advantage).
- Edit backwards - don't need to read the entire paragraph if that's what's stopping you.
- Pacing with a break between writing and editing helps prevent intent from clouding editing judgment.

How some neurodivergent people will still struggle and how to adjust for that
 How do you deal with the emotional "rather die", rejection sensitive dysphoria-related avoidance?

Reaffirm

Address solutions to concerns

Point the way

Resources / Links

- A resource I use when teaching writing (with all writers!): Jessica McCabe (of How to ADHD) has two videos on Brendan Mahan's concept of "Wall of Awful" (about stress responses

(fight, flight, freeze) and how to get around those blocks to task-initiation & persistence): [Video 1](#) and [Video 2](#)

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