Waiting for the motivation fairy

It’s easy to give in to procrastination — but Hugh Kearns and Maria Gardiner offer some tips for getting your drive back.

“I love deadlines. I love the whooshing sound they make as they go by.”
— Douglas Adams

If you were trying to set up ideal conditions for procrastination, conducting a research project would provide them. Such projects tend to be large and time-consuming: completing a doctoral research project, for example, often takes three years or more. Deadlines and endpoints are often fuzzy and ill-defined. Then there’s the reward structure: you can put in a lot of effort with little to no positive feedback along the way, and the rewards, if there are any, take a long time to come. Add to this the fact that scientists are often perfectionists with demanding, if not idealistic, expectations, and it is little wonder that procrastination is the most discussed topic in our graduate-student and researcher workshops. Many researchers simply take for granted that they are at the mercy of the forces of procrastination, doomed to increased stress levels and stretched deadlines. But there are simple strategies for pushing yourself to get engaged. The first is to recognize the patterns that you’re falling into.

ADVANCED DISPLACEMENT

Some procrastination activities are pretty obvious. There’s the morning coffee break that creeps into lunchtime. Or watching videos on YouTube and sending them to all your friends. Or updating your Facebook status when you should be updating your lab book.

But most procrastination is far more subtle, and can even be mistaken for productive work. For example, you might try to track down that elusive reference, even though you’ve already got more than you will ever have time to read. Or you could start a new experiment instead of analysing the old one. Or take stock of the glassware in the lab. Or check your e-mail. These activities make it seem as though you’re doing something useful, and you may well be, but it’s not the thing you should be doing right now.

So why is housekeeping, for example, so much fun when you’re supposed to be working on your dissertation or a paper? It’s a displacement activity, used to dispel the self-reproach or discomfort that we feel for not doing something else. Reading a novel or taking a nap that difficult task look any more appealing. That’s just not how motivation works.

Most people have a fundamental misunderstanding: we like to think that motivation leads to action, or, more simply, that when you feel like doing something, you’ll do it. This model might work for things you enjoy doing, such as watching a film or going for a walk. But it’s not particularly good for huge tasks with fuzzy deadlines. The problem is that you may never feel motivated to revise and resubmit that paper — at least not until a hard- and-fast deadline appears. You need a different model.

MOTIVATION MOJO

Some psychology research shows that action leads to motivation, which in turn leads to more action. You have to start before you feel ready; then you’ll feel more motivated, and then you’ll take more action. You’ve probably had this experience yourself. You put off running an analysis for ages; eventually, you decide to do it, and once you start, you say to yourself, “This isn’t as bad as I thought. Why not keep going while I’m at it?”

Of course, starting before you feel motivated is difficult. But certain strategies can directly tackle the conditions that lead to procrastination in the first place.

First, big projects need to be broken down into steps. Not just small steps, but tiny steps. Instead of saying you’ll make the revisions to the paper — which probably seems overwhelming — the tiny step could be that you’ll read the reviewer’s comments or you’ll make the first two changes. Second, you need to set a time or deadline by which to perform that tiny step. Saying you’ll do it later or tomorrow isn’t enough — the deadline needs to have an ‘o’clock’ attached to it. Third, you need to build in an immediate reward. If you finish reading the comments by your deadline at 16:00, you can allow yourself to have a coffee, a brief chat or a quick e-mail exchange. It’s highly likely that once you start the task, your motivation will kick in and you’ll find yourself wanting to spend longer at it.

So if the motivation fairy hasn’t been stopping off at your lab or desk very frequently, perhaps you should give her a hand. The next time you catch yourself engaging in displacement activities, remember that there’s a way to recover that elusive drive. Follow our three rules and watch your motivation grow.

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2011-Apr-20 Turbocharge Your Writing, Hugh Kearns

2 Handouts: 1) Motivation Fairy 2) Using your Adviser

Need to start before you're motivated; e.g., take tiny steps w/ rewards

Hugh Kearns www.ithinkwell.com.au

The PhD Survival Kit: a series on helping PhD students finishing their degree:

- The PhD Experience
- 7 Secrets
- XXX Self Sabotage (Maybe more sap on website)
- XXX
- Turbo Charging Your Writing

- The Typical Day

Today is the day! Need to feel clean... take a shower
Need to feel nourished... eat a nice long breakfast
etc. "Productive Procrastination"
(reorganizing files, sorting emails, reorganizing literature
buying organizing supplies
bourne's web of lit review, meetings, chatting)

How you can spend ALL day thinking about writing

For me: dishes, just one TV show... dog walking, reading literature (esp books)

Another problem: writing is V. nonlinear, so it's hard to know how close to being done you are

A Writing Audit:

Section Word Count % Complete <- quantitative too

< How can you tell how complete? Don't know if what I have is good enough to
Print out and use as writing progress log

Makes you feel reward w/ progress more
- What is the next thing?
  (Paradox of choice... too many choices can be harmful to progress, cause paralysis or regret)
  Too many choices about what you could be doing, or uncertain about task at hand.
  Solution: Have to decide beforehand what is the next thing (be specific)

  - What's my next thing?
    Summarize satisfaction — materialism, literature

  - How to decide what the next thing is?
    It might be obvious, otherwise finish whatever is almost done, or "what would my advisor or co-investigator suggest?"
    Just get started, dive in!
    "Results don't get more or less publishable by just sitting there!"
    Needs to be very small next step (micro steps)
    It doesn't feel like it'll make a difference but it's a great place to start

- Habits of Writing / Myths
  1. I'll write when I feel ready, and I don't feel ready yet! (Realness Fairy)
     You may never feel ready, you have to write before you feel ready
     (no matter how "not ready" you feel... just write something)

- Two Diseases of Research:
  - Readitis: The belief that reading one more article will solve all your research problems
    Problems:
    - Time-consuming (and too many articles to ever keep up)
    - You get confused (lots of answers, contradicting or expanding)
    - Your forget that you've read articles before, need to read to answer specific questions
      (need to write to digest)

  - Experimentitis: The belief that doing one more experiment will solve all your research problems
    Gives you a plausible excuse for not writing
    "I do analytical memos, but not dissertation proposal writing, hum?"
2011-Apr-20 Turbocharge your Writing

Hugh Kearns

- Habits/Myths of Writing cont'd

Myth 2 I'll get it all clear in my head first and then write it down (Clarity Myth)
- Writing is not recording
- Writing is creative
  - It helps you work out what gaps are, and what you don't understand
  - It helps you see connections and conclusions
- Writing clarifies your thinking
  - If you're stuck with a problem (even writing), write about it

Myth 3 Writing should be easy. It should flow. (It should be easy)
- Writing is hard work, get on with it, don't wait for the muse

Myth 4 All the conditions need to be perfect before I can write (Shuttle Launch Myth)
- If you wait for everything to line up perfectly, you will not write very often.
- You need to learn to write even if the conditions aren't perfect

Myth 5 (Creativity) Writing to a schedule will kill my creativity
- Writers who write regularly have more ideas

< I think I'm ready for outlining more, noting gaps >

- When to Write
  - Need to schedule regular writing times (Mine is usually Wed 9 - Noon, or at least 3 hrs)
  - Write little or often (even if you want large blocks of time)
  - (2 hrs is the perfect amount of time)
  - Maybe try 3 days a week < Today 4 - 5:30 >

- Two golden hours
  - Nail your feet to the floor
  - Be at the computer, 90% of success is just turning up

< What counts as writing? It's not: Editing - Formatting - Photocopying - Surfing the net - Email - References >
2011-Apr-20 Turbo Charge your Writing
Hugh Kearns

- Write first thing
  - Write earlier in the day (for most people), so you're not as tired and less things will come up, that you have to do

[Plan: 3 days a wk for 2 hrs, have highly focused writing time, other time for formatting, finding reference, reading, editing] [Need away messages]

- Where to write (no multitasking)
  - A dedicated place
  - Close the door
  - Pull out the internet cable!
  - Just have w/ you what you need for immediate tasks

- The Writing Demons
  - You're never alone when you write
  - What if it's not good enough?
  - Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTS) and so (thoughts about self)
    - Perfectionism
      - (Hitting off draft) Reaction: panic, anxiety, embarrassment, etc
      - ANT e.g. who cares, she's not worthy, qualified, failure, full of mistakes

    "If I read more, I get cleverer"

- The Imposter Syndrome
  - The feeling that you're just one step away from being found out as a complete fraud! (keep quiet & hope no one finds out)
  - Serves w/ you believe you are;
  - The Facts (to fight ANTs e. "and so") e.g. I've done good work in the past, it's a draft
When you sit down to write, it probably won't be much fun. Solution: increase exposure will decrease anxiety after ~4min time w/ repeated exposure and might even become fun.

- Write rubbish
  - Get something down
  - Writing vs. editing
    - (in conflict, need to write first, turn off editor in beginning)
    - "To write well, you first have to write!"
  - Drafts, working in progress
    - Draft 0 - Maps, outlines
    - Draft 1 - Words, brain dump
    - Draft 2 - Fleshy w/ holes
    - Draft 3-4-5 - Makes more sense
    - Draft 6 - Sent to editor
    - Draft 7 - Incorporating comments

Lit Review ➞ "What I read"
Methodology ➞ "What I did"
Results ➞ "What I found"
Discussion ➞ "What I reckon"
- Getting Overwhelmed
  - Break it down into pieces (not good for big picture, but good for writing)
  - Focus on immediate, then separately look at big picture

- Setting feedback / Getting writing better
  - 20% effort \implies 80% done
    - However, 20% done \implies 100% done requires 80% effort.
  - Quicker if you get feedback or advice

  Ask for specific feedback, give direction

- Receiving Feedback
  - Look at Big Picture (All the good parts as context for bad comments)
  - Difference between Comments and Instructions
    - You don't have to follow all suggestions

- Quick Starting, jumping in quickly to yourself
  - At end of writing session, make notes about next steps
  - Mark where you were in doc.

- What action next (Small, Soon)

  \[ \text{Satisfaction} \leftarrow \text{Materialize} \rightarrow \text{brain dump} \]

  Tomorrow, 2-4pm

Need to finish before you feel done (Stop before you feel exhausted)

Might need 1 hr or 3 hr