

Procrastination and Academic Writing Productivity

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What are your experiences?

- Free-write your experiences of procrastination?
- What is your 'but' statement? I wanted to write, but...; I would have the chapter finished, but...
- Draw procrastination

Becoming a productive writer

- Motivation
- Self-efficacy
- Understanding procrastination
- Developing writing fluency

Motivation

- Not motivated – no desire to write
- Extrinsically motivated – external rewards (approval, competition, part of your job, future goals, material rewards) – ‘Should do’ rather than ‘want to do’. Good in the short term.
- Intrinsically motivated – For the sheer pleasure of it. Hobbies
 - Will persevere through problems

Motivation, cont'd

- I am not motivated to control myself (no purpose, reward – why should I publish, I'm sure my papers will be rejected).
- I am controlled by someone or something outside of me (my family will be angry if I don't finish)
- I control myself but the rewards come from outside (I know I should publish – conflicting emotions)
- I control myself because it is important to me (I want to publish because I'm an academic)
- I have no need to control myself because I love doing this (research is exciting).

What does this mean for writing?

- Often difficult to separate extrinsic and intrinsic rewards?
- How can I make this something I want to do?
- How can I make this enjoyable?
- What destroys my motivation to write?
- Find out what interests you and build on this?

Understanding motivation

- How can understanding motivation help you with your writing?

Self-efficacy

- The belief in one's capacity to do a particular task
- Past successful performance increases self-efficacy
- Repeated failure undermines self-efficacy
- With self-efficacy, you may not know how to do a task but will have the confidence that you will cope or be able to find help
- Without, may have ability but don't have belief, so disengage.

Perseverance

1. A person's perceptions of their ability to do the task
 2. Their values
 3. How important the goal is to their values
- People who have strong self-efficacy will set higher goals and persist longer through difficulties.

Collaborating

- Working with other people, research shows, increases self-efficacy
 - Modelling
 - Positive self-reflection

Understanding self-efficacy

- How can understanding self-efficacy help you with your writing?

Procrastination

- Most sought-after workshop topic
- Often not about self-discipline

Procrastination

- Who procrastinates?
 - Writers
 - Research writers
 - Grant writers
 - Students (post/graduate students, particularly)
 - Writers of long documents

What is procrastination?

- Avoiding a task
- Delaying on a task (even though one has scheduled to work on it)
- Not completing a task

- No-one intends to procrastinate. Yet, procrastination is common. For people who write, however, it is a defining feature.
- Procrastination is habitually postponing tasks so that we wait until the last possible minute, then we rush through the job and the result is less than if we had done the work with enough time.

Lack of time?

- 'I don't have time'
- Procrastination isn't caused by a lack of time. *A lack of time is the result of procrastination.*

Types of procrastinators

- Perfectionists: “I can write but only when I know exactly what to write”. Sets unachievable goals or standards. Assumes everyone else writes flawlessly. (These writers gradually produce less and less)
- Binge writers (Boice, 1996): “I can write but only under pressure”. Waits until the last minute and then all is sacrificed to get the job done. (Although these writers do produce, they’re not prolific)

Types of procrastinators

- Busy bees: “I would write but I have so much to do”. Starts a club, takes up running marathons, joins committees when there are writing tasks to be done.
- Linda Sapadin (1996) argues that people who procrastinate frequently use ‘but’ when talking about their actions.

Why do we procrastinate?

- Anxiety
- Writing is difficult
- Cognitively difficult task
- Boredom

Why worry?

- Because we get stuck in a cycle.
- One delayed task crowds on to another and we become tired, anxious and stressed.
- We add to this with critical self-talk and guilt.
- The result is a downward spiral of lowering self-esteem, more unhelpful self-talk and the increasing pressure of time.
- Ultimately this results in a lack of productivity, underperformance and on going anxiety.

Is there such a thing as positive procrastination?

- Sometimes waiting is beneficial to writing. We have a problem to solve, some unconscious thinking to do or need time to refresh our thinking. Not habitual and not a result of trying to avoid or escape the writing task. Procrastinators, by contrast, fritter away time while worrying about it.
- *Active* procrastinators deliberately delay tasks. Passive procrastinators are paralysed by their indecision to act and don't complete tasks on time.

How can we tell the difference?

- How do we distinguish between binge writing and positive procrastination?
- How can we tell if we are searching for pie-in-the sky perfectionism or just trying to do a quality job?
 - The only way we can tell is through introspection and self-awareness.
 - Do you feel debilitated or incapacitated when you finish or do you feel energised?

What can I do?

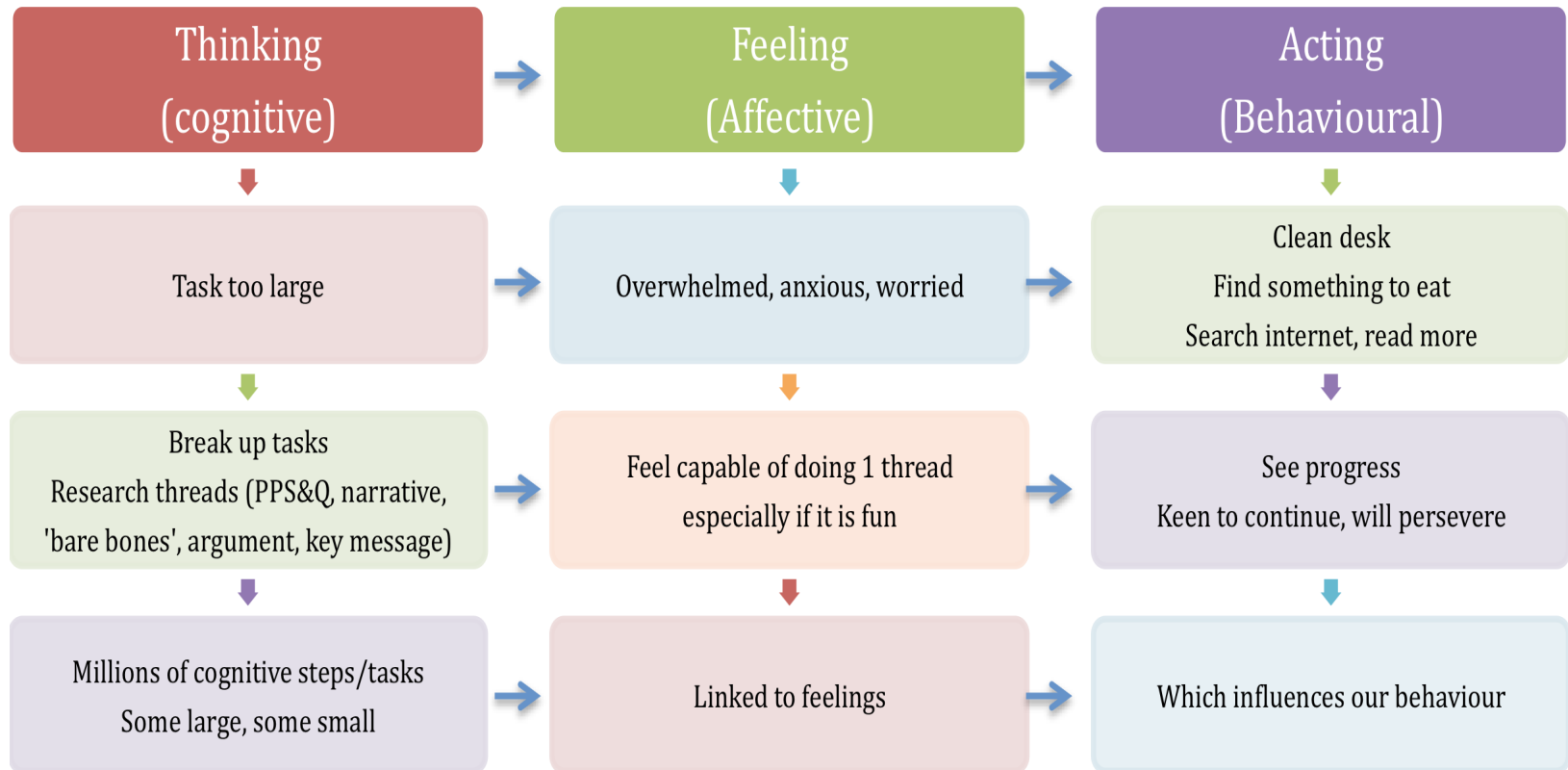
- Three themes: *thinking, feeling, and acting*.
- On occasion, we may get stuck because of a *cognitive* problem and we need to think our way through.
- Our *emotions* affect our writing practice: we feel what we write.
- Or we may find ourselves not writing because we simply don't put in enough time to write and our *habits* let us down.

Thinking, feeling, acting

- These themes are not discrete packages. Instead, they are more like streams of water that join and intermingle. Sometimes it's difficult to attribute one block to any one stream. However, separating out these three themes allows us to see our practices in detail. The more we understand how we think, feel or act when it comes to writing, the more we can adapt and change.

Procrastination/Productive Writing

Source: Badenhorst, C. (2010). *Productive writing: Becoming a prolific academic writer*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.



Thinking

- Writing a research paper or a grant application is a cognitively complex task.
- **Strategies:** Break down the task into smaller pieces, work with someone else, PPS&Q's, work out what you want to say, talk about your research, write little bits and pieces that eventually form a draft, write lots of drafts (begin with terrible ones), get feedback (choose carefully), sleep on the problem.
- **Techniques:** Free-writing to a timer, 10 mins write, 2 mins break, concept mapping for ideas, sketching, delay editing until the next day, researcher's journal.

Feeling

- One of the most common emotions is writing anxiety which means anxious feelings (about oneself as a writer, one's writing situation, or one's writing task) that disrupt the writing process.
- The more negative one feels about writing, the more one avoids it.
- Emotions may surface at different points in the writing process. A student, for example, who produced a brilliant proposal, may find herself too anxious to continue because her expectations of herself (and her perception of others' expectations) have grown so much. An academic may begin to lose a sense of identity.

Feeling

- **Strategies:** Awareness, self-reflection, reflecting on audience, watching self-criticism, not getting criticism in early drafts, finding support, watch tiredness, recognising different stages of the writing journey, build your self belief
- **Techniques:** Free write about your anxiety, write your way through the block, externalise your critical voice, write for a friendly audience
- Plot your emotions on a continuum when you write. With anxiety, fear and apprehension on the one side and pleasure, joy and ecstasy on the other.
- Write sentences beginning with 'I feel...' in relation to writing generally or on a specific project. Write these sentences until you can't write anymore. Then examine them. See if there are patterns. What anxieties appear?

Acting

- This is our writing practice or behaviour.
- Strategies: Notice what makes you avoid writing or what makes up get up when you are writing, work out what the problem is and apply a strategy/technique; notice your best working times/places, how do deadlines work for you, work on your self-regulation (in fun ways).
- Techniques: Set up your writing 'space', develop rituals, play music, Boice's contingency, 15 mins a day, inaction/action continuum, words/day, **rewards**.

Unusual procrastination

- Some people only procrastinate over particular writing projects.
- They may not have a history of procrastination.
- Two most common scenarios for this are writing as dissertation and writing a book.
- Why? – Monumental task, often no appropriate guidelines, feedback or support, stakes are high.

Disabling ourselves

- Sometimes procrastination is about disabling ourselves. When we undermine our chances of success we are at least in control.
- We don't put in the effort, we know the outcome – there are no surprises.
- This is a protective mechanism
- But it still makes us feel guilty and ashamed

- Those who procrastinate often avoid self-reflection
- Procrastination can often be subtle, addictive, dependent on our (erroneous) perceptions.
- It might happen in different ways on different writing projects.

Cultivating a writing identity

- Do you see yourself as a writer?
 - For a Phd thesis you will probably write about 60 000 words (the size of a large novel).
- Or do you see yourself as a researcher first and writer second?
- Why is it important to know this?

Identity

- How we spend our time is who we are.
- Some people conceive of themselves as researchers first and foremost. They write to report on research. Others see themselves as academic writers who will write only in academic spheres. Still others see themselves as writers who work in an academic context but will write in many other milieus as well. Students often see themselves as beginner scholars. (Draw your self-concept).
- Writing is a meaning-making activity. Fills a need in many people – especially productive writers - see themselves as writers.

Becoming a writer

- Thinking like a writer
- Seeing like a writer
- Behaving like a writer
- At least until this project is finished!

Thank you!