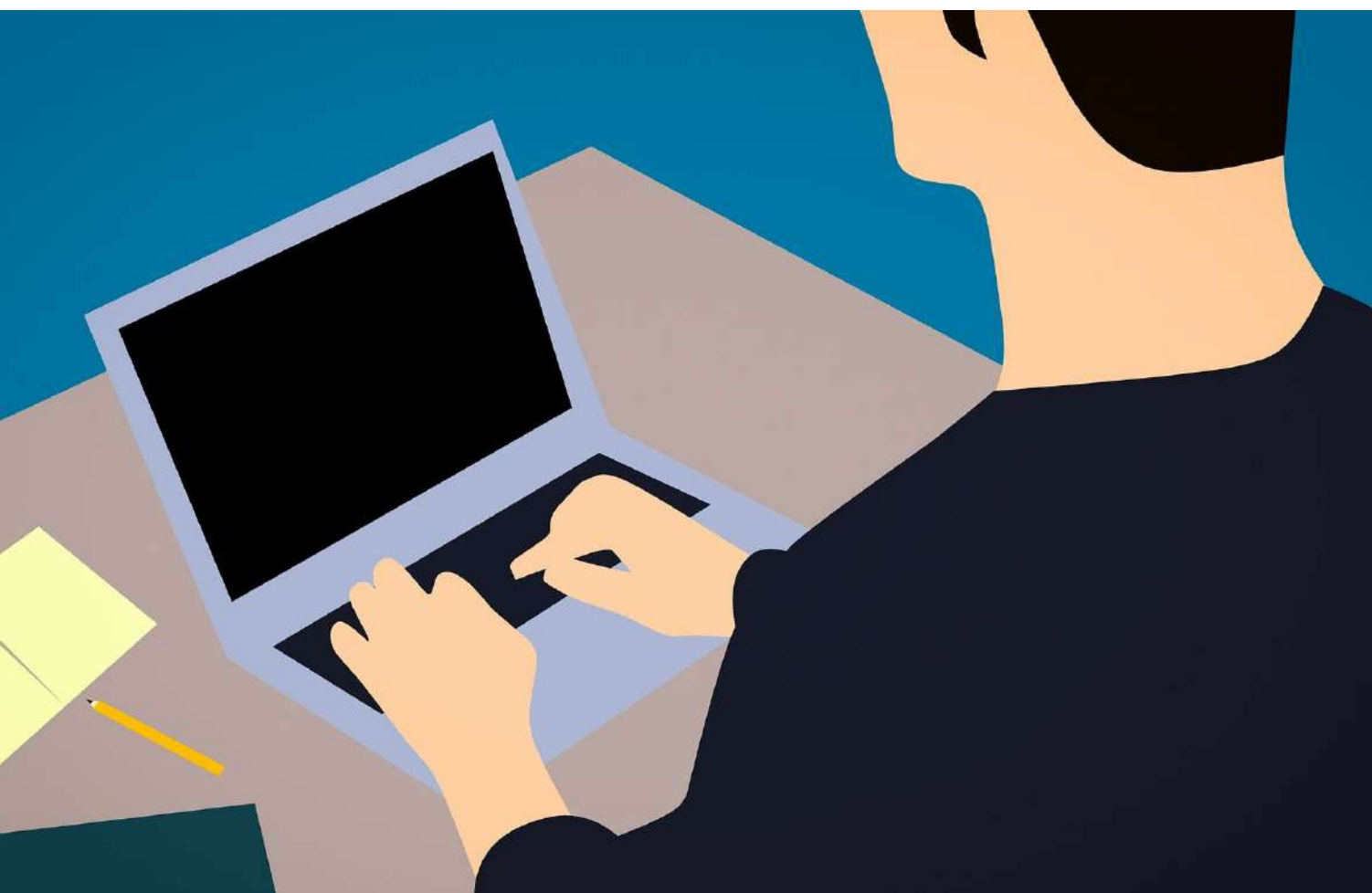


March 2019

THE LIFE OF A PRODUCTIVE SCHOLARLY AUTHOR

How academics write, the barriers they face and why publishers and institutions should feel optimistic.



Introduction

When scholars struggle to write and publish, individuals lose career opportunities, institutions lose ranking and publishers lose revenue.

The stakes of low academic writing productivity are high.

This research seeks to learn more about the scholarly writing process. It investigates what impacts on writing and publishing productivity across a scholarly career, the pressures and barriers authors face and the methodologies they use to cope.

Scope

The 2018 study consisted of an anonymous online survey asking a series of questions about academic writing productivity and practice. Demographics included age, role, country and research discipline. A self-selected group of 593 academics and researchers took part.

The survey was co-designed with Dr Christine Tulley, professor of English and director of the Masters of Arts in Rhetoric and Writing programme, Findlay University and Lettie Conrad, publishing consultant, North American editor for the ALPSP journal and advisor at Deepdyve. Data was collated and analysed by Deirdre Watchorn, insight and analysis at De Gruyter Academic Publishing.

The research was led by Prolifiko, a services and training consultancy specialising in improving the productivity and performance of writers and content creators.

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Findings and recommendations

The findings and insights contained in this study have positive implications for individuals, publishers and institutions. But ultimately, our recommendation from it comes down to one thing.

Having a better understanding of the author experience benefits everyone involved in the academic writing and publishing process.

Through treating authors as individuals, who have their own personal relationship with writing and publishing, everybody wins. When scholarly writers are approached as mere content creators who all write in a similar way and can be supported or motivated with generic advice – everybody loses.

These findings give us great hope and optimism. Here's why.

For individuals: Whilst there are actions an author can take to improve their writing practice and publishing process, productivity isn't about achieving or failing to meet a certain gold standard. Rather, it's about finding a personal system that suits the individual author and encouragingly, this can be achieved at any point in a scholarly career. Age and experience neither determine nor limit productivity.

For publishers: Personal experience has been absent from the scholarly publishing process for too long – but these findings can be a catalyst for change. When publishers understand how and why academics write and at what points in the publishing process they struggle, publishers can attract and retain authors; motivate and engage them; and, support and promote them better. That creates a direct commercial and competitive advantage.

For institutions: Academic authors experience different pressures and barriers throughout a career and are motivated to write predominantly from a personal wish to progress in their fields – not through research targets. This has a number of positive implications for institutions who might be looking for ways to incentivise their authors or design interventions to support them.

We believe that through creating solutions based in human experience, stakeholders with a vested interest in scholarly communications can better prepare authors for the ups and downs of an academic writing career and improve productivity – not just output but quality – as a result.

1. Academic output and publishing preferences

We asked authors what they wrote and gave them a list of outputs to choose from. Participants could choose as many as they wished.

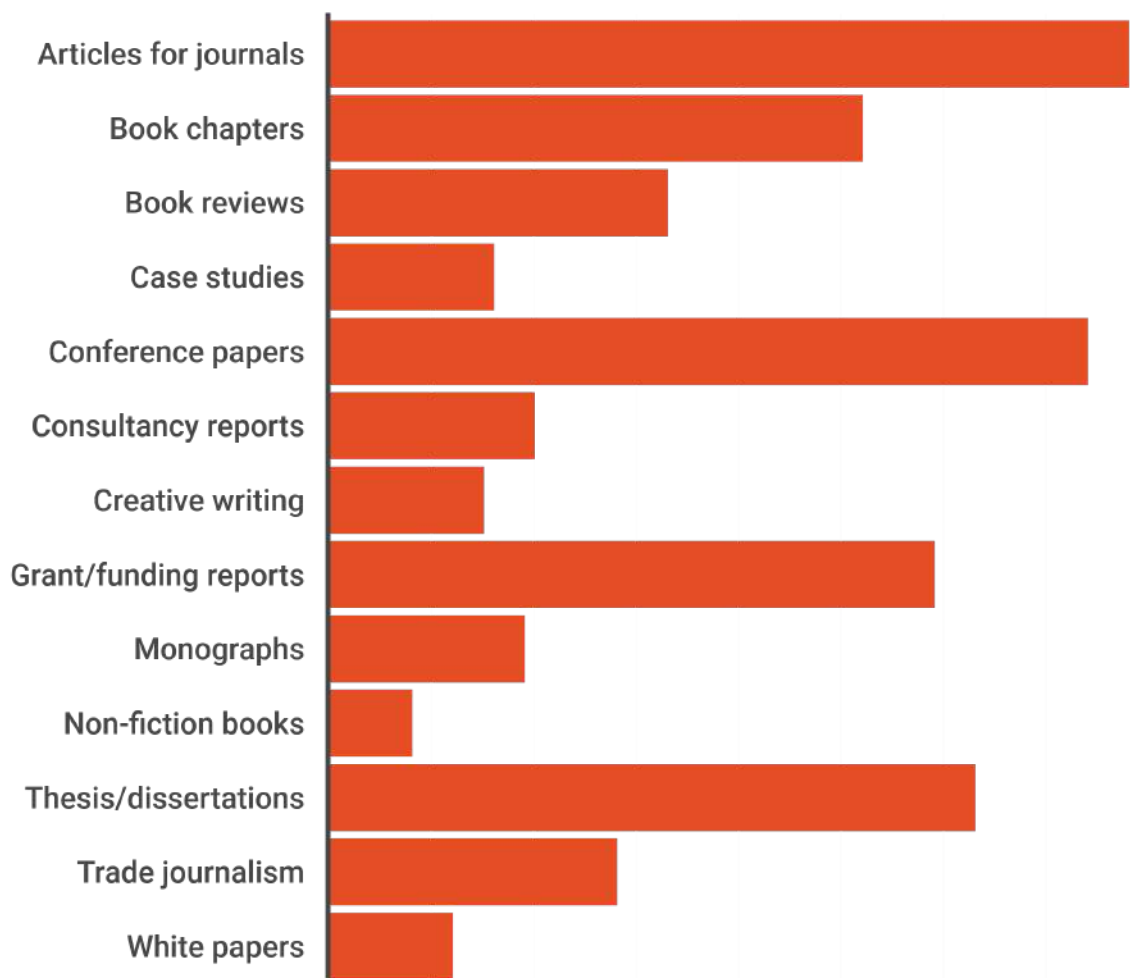
Whilst academics produce a variety of written outputs and their range broadens as they gain experience, the data shows authors seem to prioritise writing some things over others at certain points of their careers.

> **Mid-career academics focus on forms of writing linked to career progression**

> **Late to mid-career scholars appear to prioritise book and long form writing**

> **Late career academics prioritise writing associated with personal brand building and creative expression**

What academics write: outputs

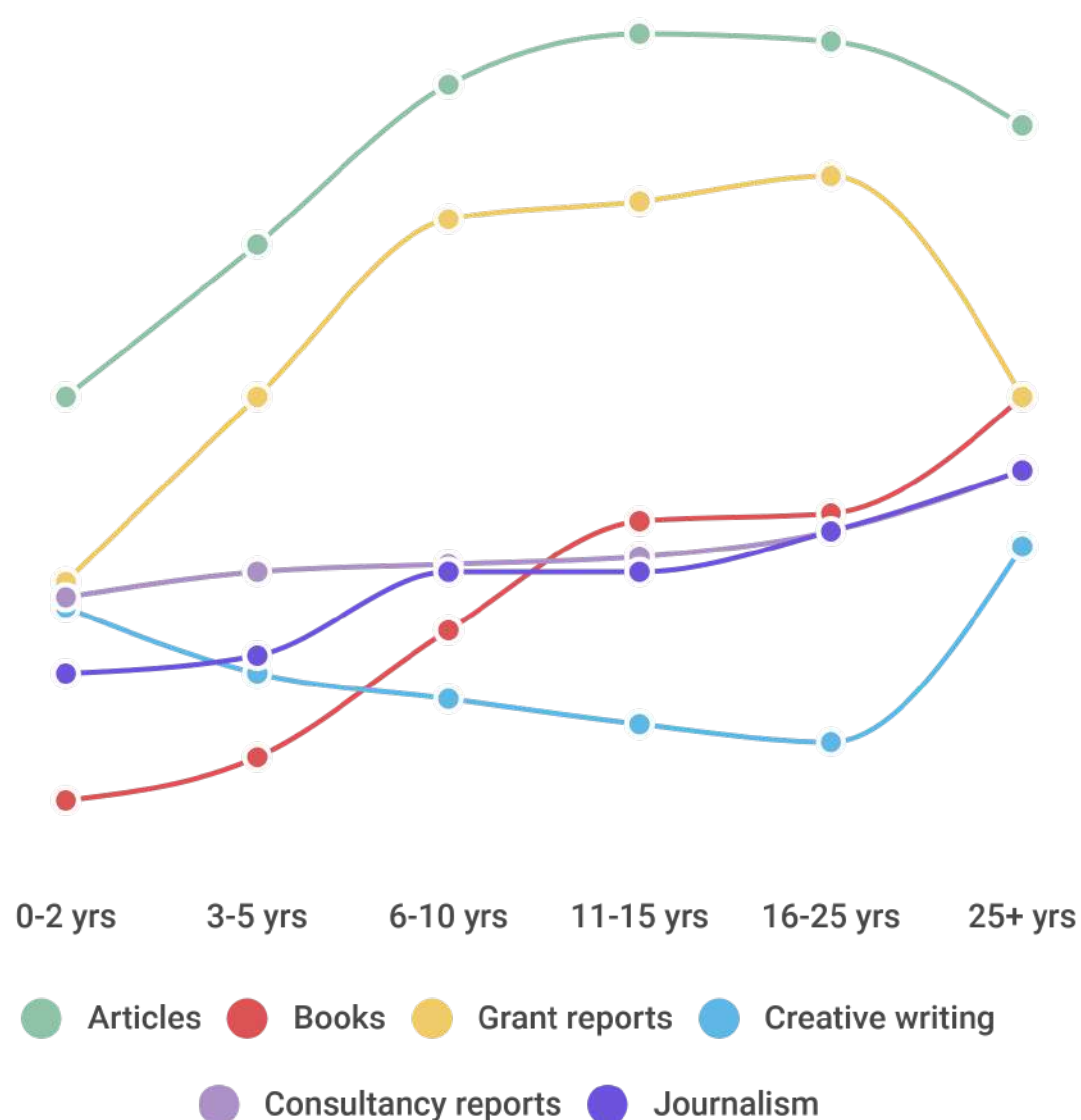


A life of writing

Unsurprisingly, the early years of an academic career are dominated by writing theses and dissertations, but as a scholar reaches mid-career, their attention turns to writing journal articles, conference papers and grant reports. All forms of writing associated with career progression.

Whilst mid-career academics write more books, book chapters and book reviews, long-form writing doesn't appear to be a priority until they approach late-career. At this stage, all types of long-form content writing seem to become more important. At the same time, authors write fewer journal articles, conference papers and especially, grant reports.

What academics write: career stage



From thesis to thought leader

Whilst we must be cautious of linking happiness with writing any particular form of content, academics do appear to prioritise writing some types of projects over others at certain points in their careers - perhaps when they have the freedom to do so. Our qualitative findings certainly back this up.

The research finds a strong link between those who predominantly write books with feeling 'highly satisfied' and those who mainly write grant reports with feeling 'highly dissatisfied'.

The findings could also indicate that academics prioritise their personal brands or giving back to their chosen fields as they progress in their careers and that creative expression becomes increasingly important at late career stage.

As a scholar gains experience, they write more blogs, more journalistic pieces and more consultancy reports. The data also shows that academic authors spend the most time engaged in creative writing either when they have 0-2 years' experience or 25+.

Four to five thousand words is my natural length. I find the idea of writing a book challenging but it's something I've always wanted to do.

If I never wrote a book nobody from the university would even notice. There's no incentive. For me, it's a labour of love.

I wrote my first book when I was 24. I always have a book on the go. I'm dying to get on with the next book now but I'm holding back!

2. Pressure to write and publish

We asked authors whether they feel under pressure to write and publish and if so, where this pressure comes from.

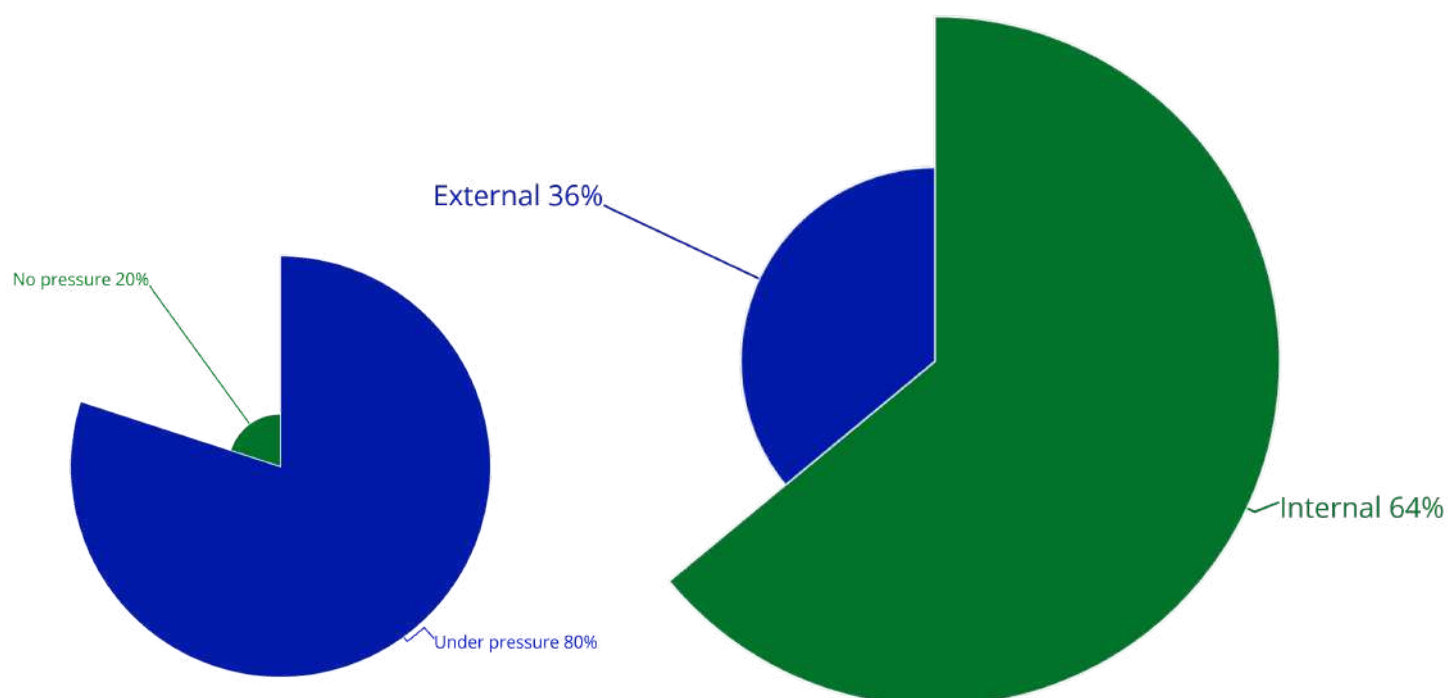
- **80%** of scholars say they feel under pressure to write and publish more than they currently do. But of those academics who feel pressure...
- **64%** say this pressure is primarily internal (from career ambitions and a personal wish to succeed) whilst **36%** say it's external (from their institutions, colleagues, senior managers or publishers).

However, this pressure is not constant throughout a career.

> **Academics feel most pressure to publish at the very beginning of a career - when they are perhaps the least equipped to cope**

> **Internal pressure is experienced most acutely between years 3-10 and this linked to dissatisfaction.**

> **Mid to late and late career academics experience pressure, but this doesn't necessarily lead to dissatisfaction.**



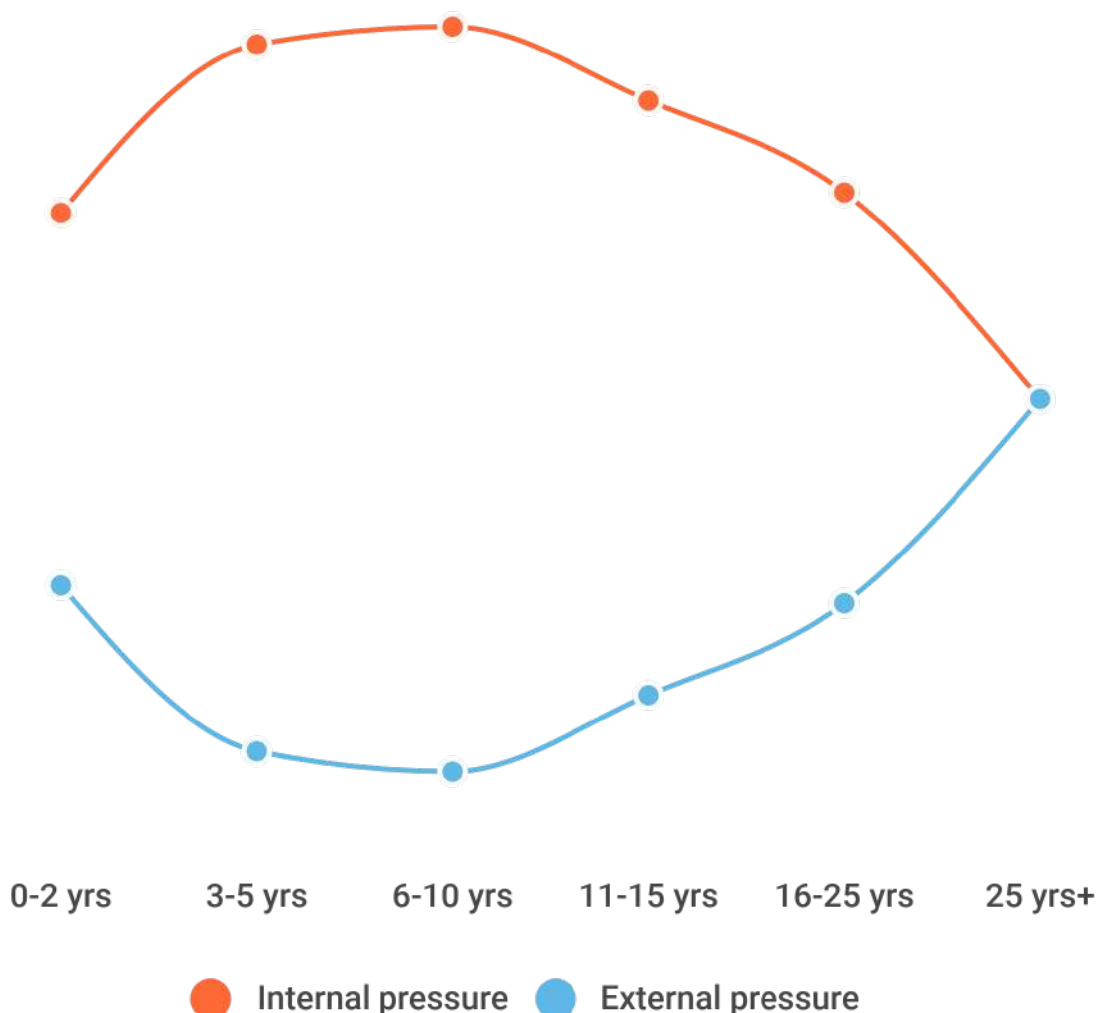
Early career pressures

Academics with between 3-5 years' experience feel the most pressure of their careers to write and publish. At this point in their career, **85%** of authors surveyed say they feel under pressure to write and publish more than they currently do.

However, academics experience most **internal pressure** to write and publish more (pressure they put themselves under) between years 3-10 as they are establishing their careers.

As internal pressure is more strongly linked to high levels of dissatisfaction than external pressure, this suggests these early to mid-career years are particularly trying.

Internal vs external pressure across a career



Mid- to late career pressures

Intriguingly, in later career (from around year 16) external pressure seems to increase once more. Indeed, academics with 25 years+ experience report feeling the highest amount of external pressure to write and publish of their working lives.

Whilst this might seem a counter intuitive finding, it could reveal how the source of external pressure to write changes throughout a career.

For example, whilst it's unlikely that a scholar with decades of experience will feel much pressure from publishing targets, it could be that after years of work they've reached guru status and so, are inundated with calls on their time.

However, as the research also reveals that at late career stage, pressure is no longer linked to dissatisfaction, this could also indicate that scholars don't necessarily mind this kind of pressure. In short, they're very busy but also highly fulfilled and able to cope.

Oddly, I'm not sure why I write. I am tenured and fully promoted so it's not for that. I enjoy it, the craft of it. It's part of my job. I think the work is important.

I'm at an institution that's increasingly emphasising writing as part of the promotion process. I don't feel pressure at the moment - but I know it's coming.

As an emerita, I write because I feel a drive to write not because anyone compels or expects me to.

I feel I never have enough time for scholarly productivity. It's always "death by a thousand cuts" with everything else that needs to get done, when I should be writing.

3. Barriers to writing and publishing

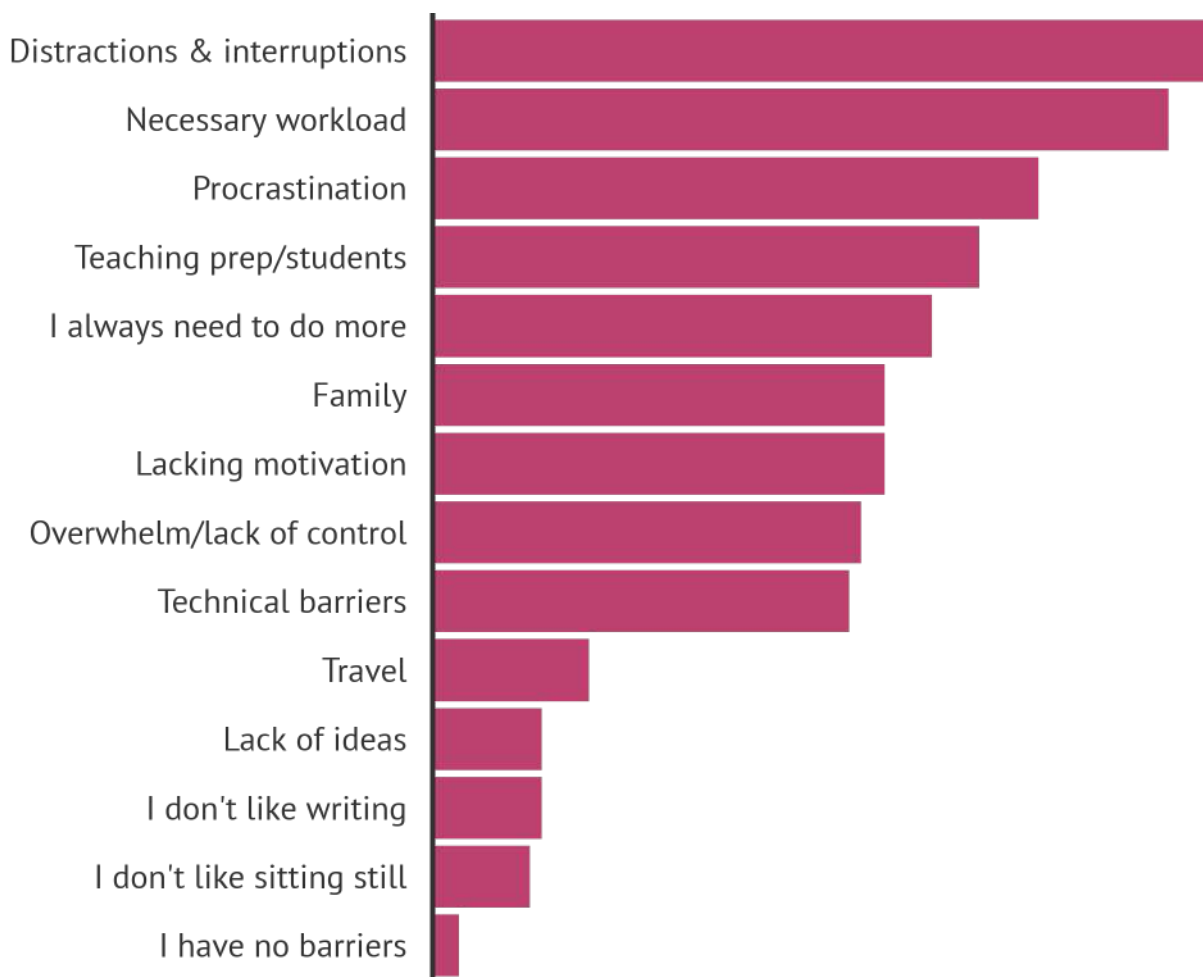
We asked what barriers academic authors face when writing and publishing and gave participants a list of possible responses they could select.

Just **2%** of academics say they don't experience any barriers whatsoever with the vast majority experiencing productivity blocks of some kind.

However, the research finds that barriers are experienced differently across the course of a career.

- > **Early career blockers tend to be either psychological and technical in nature**
- > **Mid-career barriers are related to work overload and time-management**
- > **Late career blockers are few and far between and don't seem to cause stress**

Barriers to writing: overall



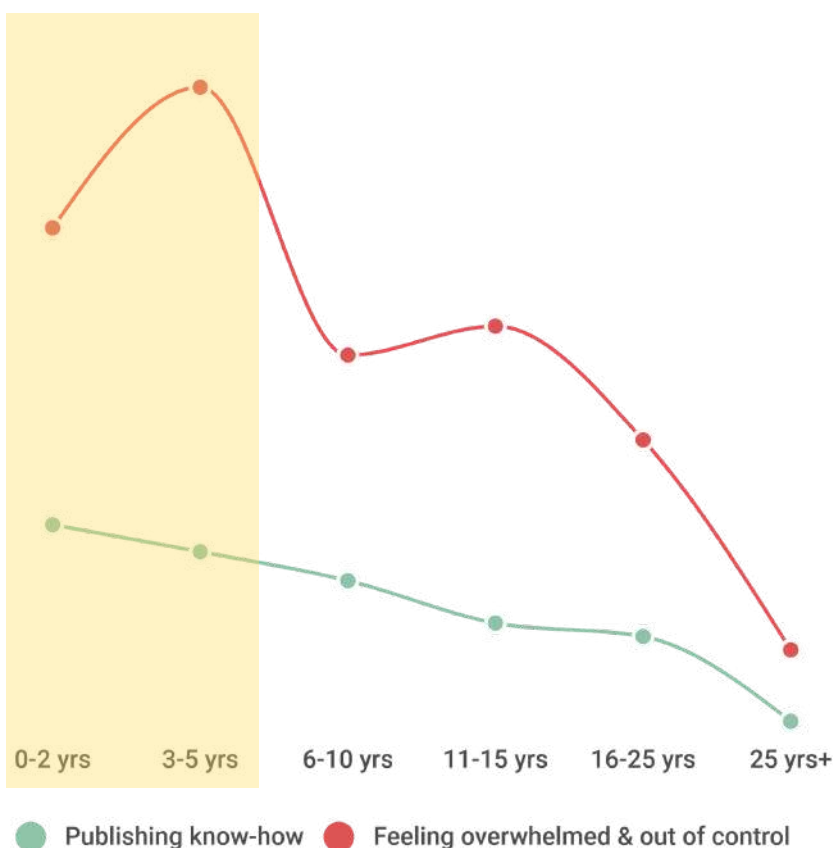
Brain barriers

Early career researchers (ECRs) experience a greater range of blocks and barriers to writing and publishing productivity than at any other point in their careers. They also experience these barriers more acutely.

They are most likely to be held back by barriers that are either **psychological** or **technical** in nature, both of which are also linked to feelings of dissatisfaction:

- **Psychological:** procrastination, lack of motivation, experiencing negative moods, feeling overwhelmed and 'out of control'.
- **Technical:** navigating the peer-review process or 'feeling stuck' due to poor research results.

Early career barriers



I feel like I need a shrink, frankly, as I cannot dissociate my life from my writing.

I'm a novice researcher, how do I know if I'm living up to the expectation of my job?

I always wait for the deadline to be really soon to start writing, so as a result, I always write in a state of panic.

Time management takes over

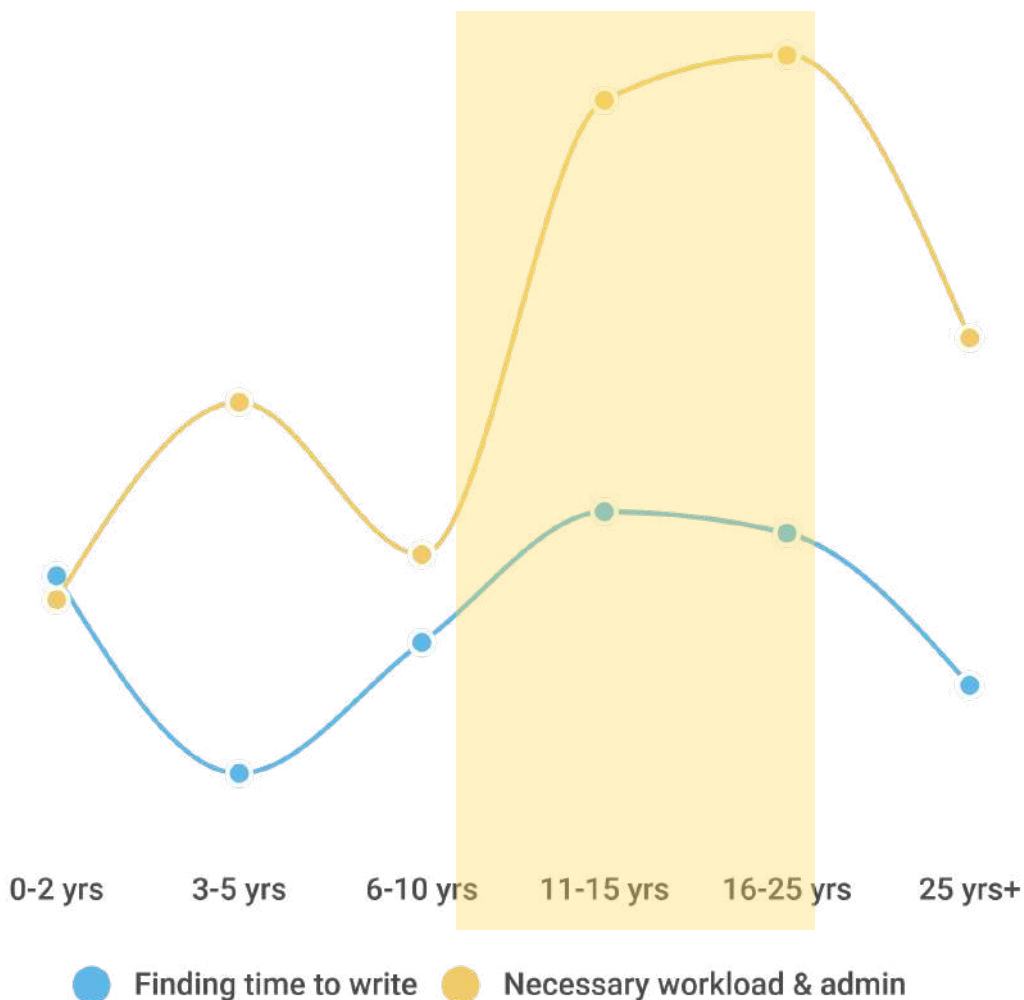
As academics progress, psychological and technical barriers lose their intensity but are replaced by blockers linked to an individual's workload or expanded professional role.

Mid-career academics are more likely to be held back by **time management** barriers such as everyday distractions and interruptions, 'necessary workload' and admin. Family commitments are also major barriers at this stage.

All the student enquires, all the management responsibilities – you don't really get any time to write anything.

Too many administrative responsibilities and family commitments make it hard to achieve any substantial momentum.

Mid-career barriers



Coping mechanisms count

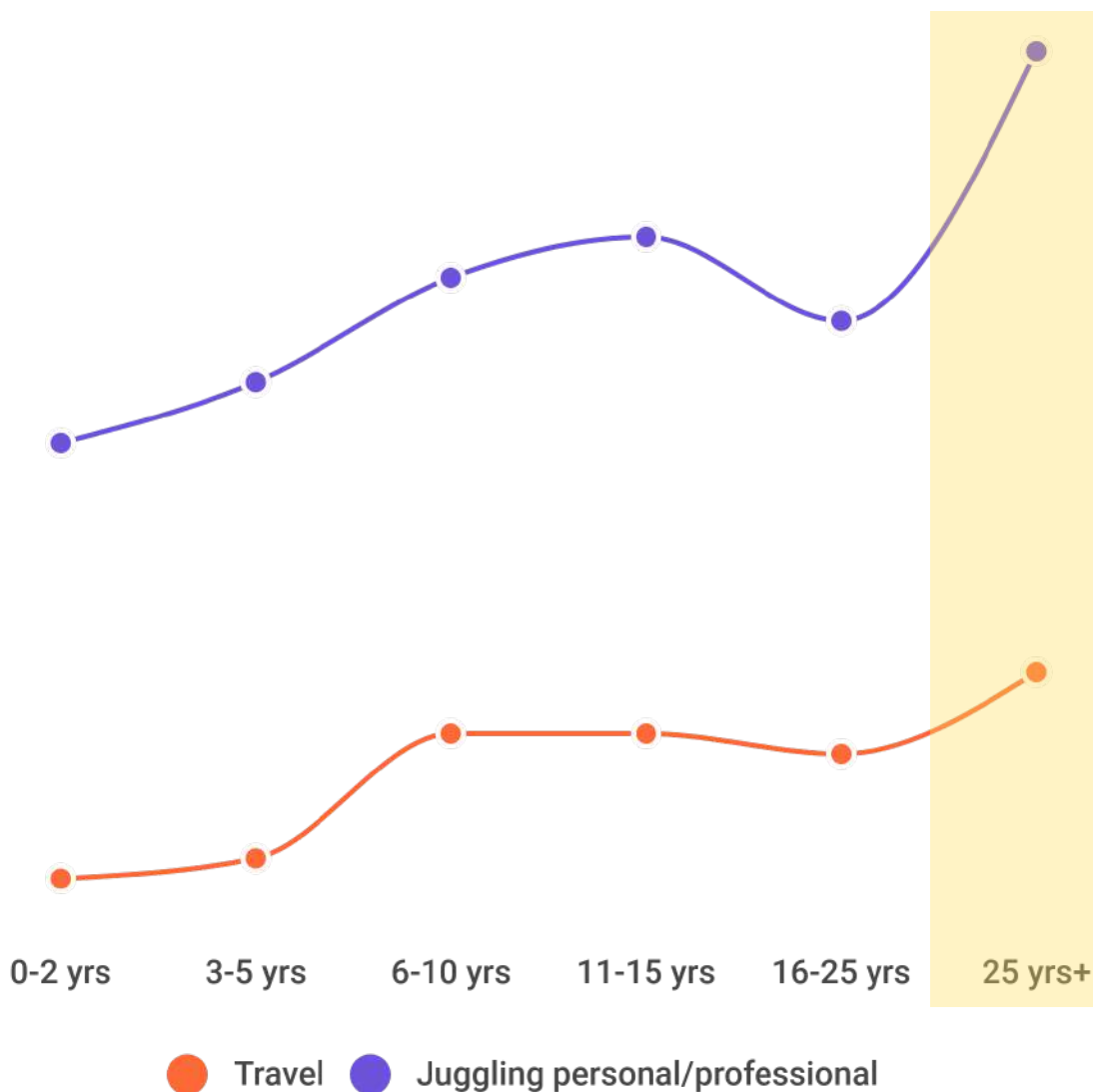
In late career, most barriers drop away (this could also be a indicator of survivor bias) although 'interruptions' do still have an impact as does 'travel'.

This might reflect the afore-mentioned guru status these academics may enjoy.

Currently I have few teaching or administration duties, so I can structure my day around writing.

Lots of travel breaks into my schedule.

Late career barriers



4. Writing and satisfaction

The study asked academics how satisfied they are with their writing and publishing process on a scale of 1 to 10 - with 1 being 'not at all satisfied' and 10 being 'very satisfied'.

We found that academics experience the lowest levels of satisfaction with their writing and publishing in the first two years of their careers - and their highest at the very end. However, **we do not** find a strong link between age and satisfaction suggesting a range of influencing factors at work - not just experience.

- > **Writing more is linked to satisfaction**
- > **Internal pressure causes stress and dissatisfaction**
- > **Where you live and work has an impact on satisfaction**

The academics who have published the most are also the people most satisfied with their writing processes. Those who have published just one or two articles or have yet to be published are by far the least satisfied.

Once an author has published around 11 academic pieces their satisfaction levels increase and continue to do so for the rest of their career.

Those who experience the highest levels of internal pressure are more likely to feel dissatisfied with their writing and publishing. High levels of internal pressure can be experienced at any age.

We also found that demographics have an impact on satisfaction. For example, professors are most likely to feel highly satisfied with their writing whilst lecturers and instructors feel the least.

Females are more satisfied than males and those working in STEM subjects (and in particular chemistry) report high levels of satisfaction.

The most satisfied of our sample work in the US and Australia and the least satisfied of academics work in the UK.

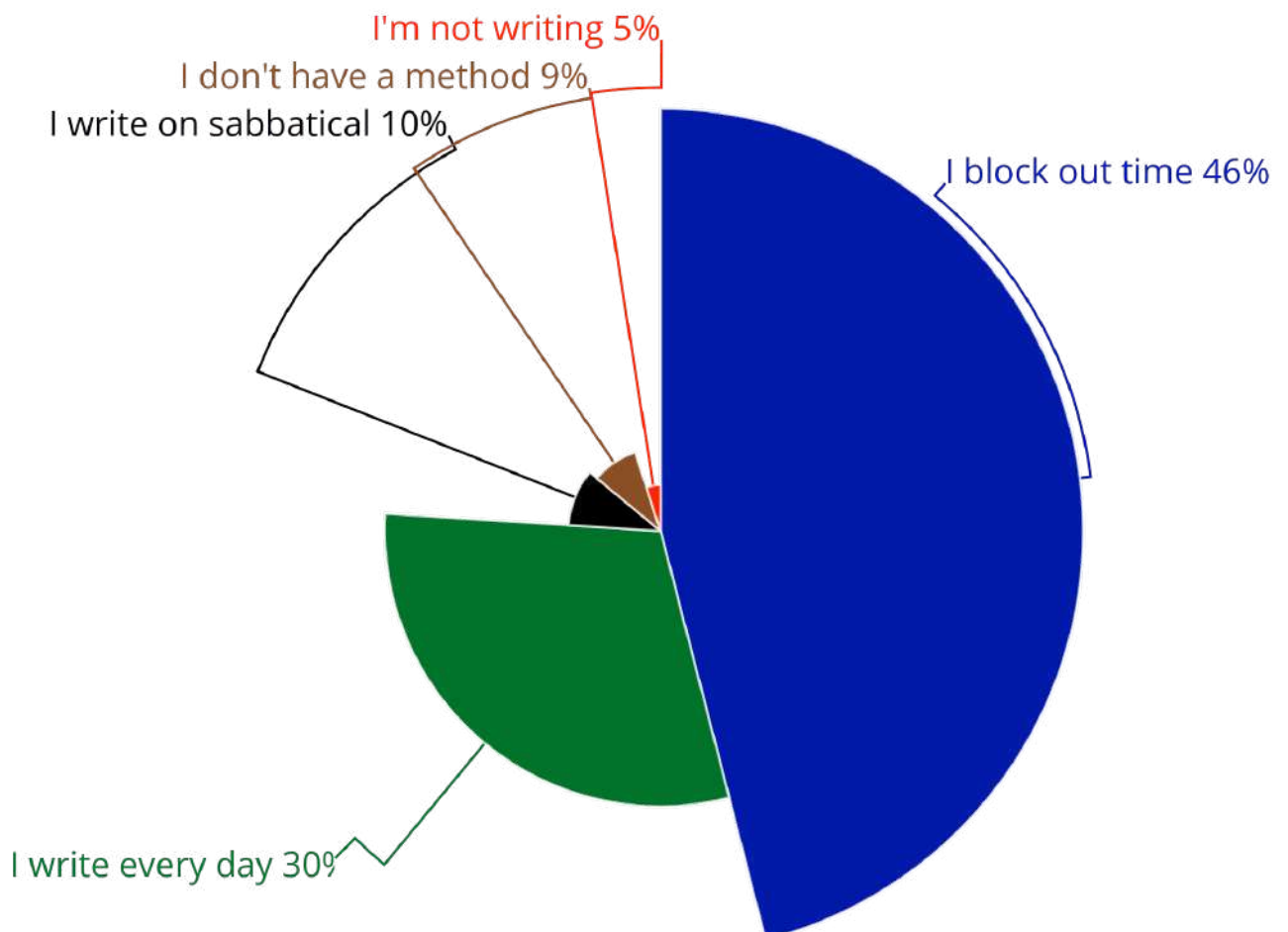
Publishers used to like me because I was a reliable person. I delivered on time - or early. But I'm losing that now. I'm not reliable when it comes to hitting deadlines - I know that and I hate it. I'm not comfortable with that at all - it's making me question other things about my career too.

5. Writing schedules

The study asked academics about the scheduling tactics they use to keep writing and publishing: whether they typically write daily, in blocks of time across a week or a month or whether they wrote in large chunks of time such as on holiday or sabbatical.

We found that academics shift how they schedule their writing time over the course of a career perhaps suggesting that scheduling techniques are related to this factor.

- > In early career, authors write daily, whilst in mid-career onwards they time block
- > Daily writing is linked to satisfaction, time blocking is linked to productivity
- > Writing on sabbatical or holiday leaves authors neither satisfied or productive



Time blocking vs daily writing

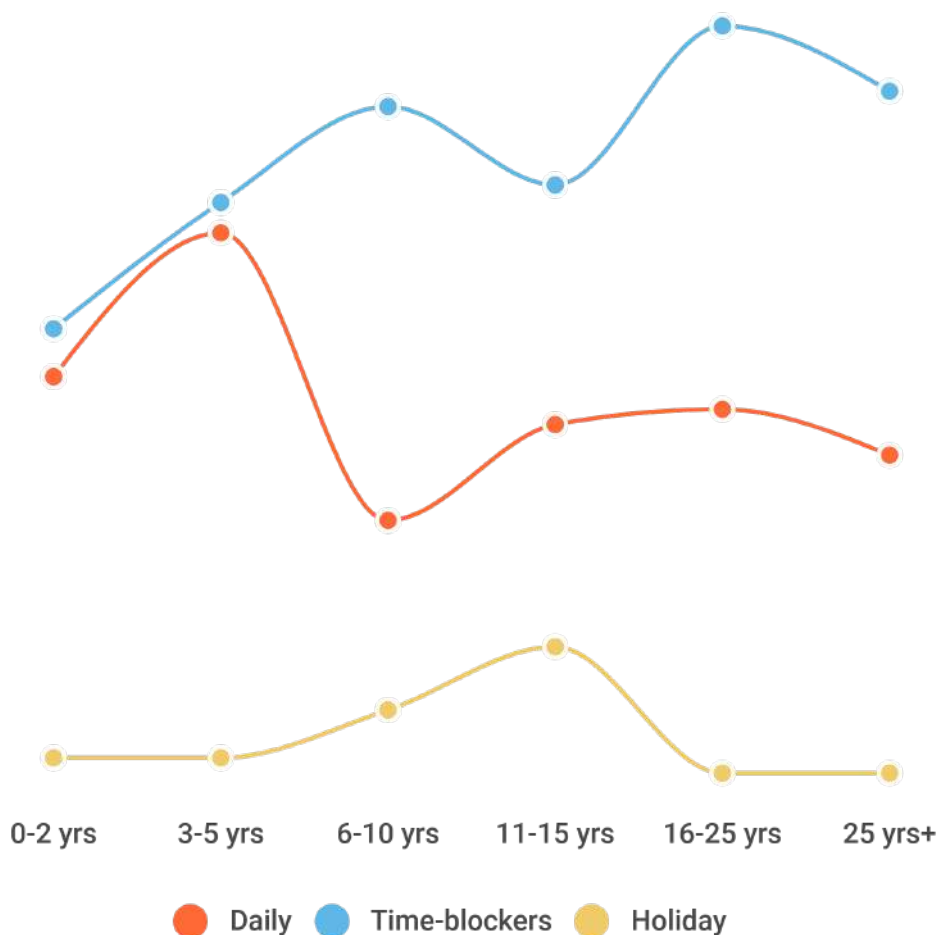
Academics early on in their careers rely on daily writing as their chosen method to get the work done whilst those mid- and particularly late career prefer to write in blocks of time, across a week or a month.

Whilst often considered the gold standard in terms of productivity, this might suggest that writing every day is simply unachievable and perhaps unrealistic for today's busy scholar.

When I write I block out a couple of straight days and I plan it in beforehand.

I've carved out five hours to write on Thursdays and eight hours on Sundays. This helps me make progress and I genuinely enjoy the time.

How academics schedule time: career stage



Sabbatical or holiday writing

Interestingly, whilst daily writing is linked to satisfaction, it's not linked to high productivity. The most productive authors use the time blocking technique to schedule in writing time.

What's clear is that authors who try to write on holiday or on sabbatical experience the lowest levels of satisfaction with their writing by far.

They also have low productivity.

Perhaps these authors have unrealistic expectations as to what they can achieve in long periods of time. Alternatively, they might face work burnout prepping for time out of the office.

I block out large chunks of time for writing, then end up co-opting that time for other work issues – this is very stressful.

I am paralysed by procrastination, especially in the face of large blocks of time. I play 'chicken' with deadlines. I have some but not enough strategies to mitigate this.

I leave writing to blocks of holiday time, which is never really enough. Everything then happens in a rush.

6. Writing routines and systems

We asked authors whether they used some kind of personal system to help them keep writing and publishing.

A system is the combination of personal tactics an author uses to beat their writing barriers, keep motivated, find the time and overcome the many distractions and interruptions in their day.

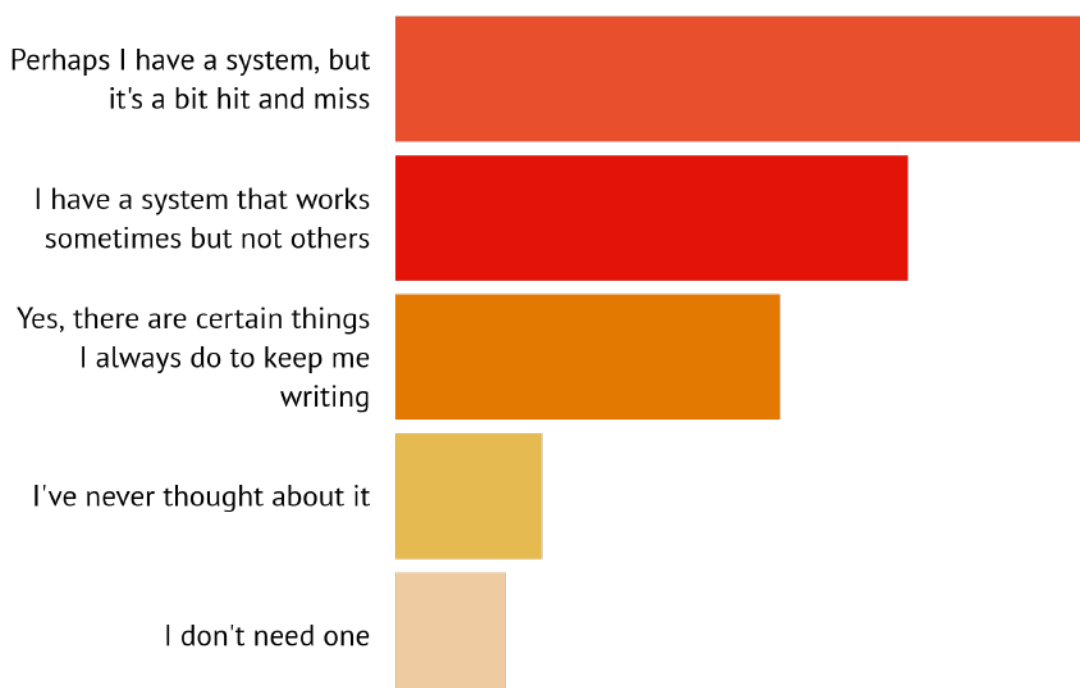
Overwhelmingly, we found that the academics who had a writing system seemed far better able to cope with the stresses and strains of academic life. Whilst age and experience are factors (the older and more experienced you are the more likely it is that you'll have found a system) the two factors are **not contingent**.

In short, we found young scholars who are both happy and productive and old masters who are both miserable and blocked.

> **Finding a personal productivity system is strongly linked to:**

- > Increased productivity and satisfaction
- > Reduction in both external and internal pressure
- > Reduction in barriers and blocks experienced

Do you have a system of some kind? Overall findings



Productive systems

Authors who say they have a system to help them write and publish are:

- > More productive. Most likely to have written and published the highest number of pieces - between 20 to 100+.
- > Better at coping with pressure. **40%** of authors with a system say they feel under no pressure to write whatsoever.
- > More satisfied. **61%** say they're highly satisfied with their writing process.
- > Far less likely to experience blocks and barriers. In fact, they experience very few.

On the other side, those who say they 'haven't given the issue any thought' are most likely to have published either none or one to two academic pieces. They are:

- > More likely to feel unhappy. **47%** who say they've 'never thought' whether they have a system say they're highly dissatisfied compared to just **7%** of those with.
- > More likely to experience internal pressure - the type linked to high stress.
- > More likely to experience psychological barriers which again, are linked to high levels of dissatisfaction and stress.

I am retired and can choose what and when to write. But this freedom reduces my output considerably and causes me stress.

I use co-authoring as a psychological trigger. When you have to deliver to someone else it forces you to get your butt in the chair.

I just wrote an entire monograph in less than four months and feel great about the content. My system works really well.

As a new faculty member (just starting my second year), I'm really pleased that I've incorporated research into my schedule throughout the semester.

In summary

The study identified six elements of scholarly writing and publishing productivity behaviour:

- 1. Academic output and publishing preferences:** Academics seem to prioritise writing some types of content more than others; what an academic chooses to write depends on their career stage and perhaps, how much freedom they have.
- 2. Pressure to write and publish:** All academics experience pressure to write and publish but what seems to matter more - in terms of its impact on productivity and satisfaction - is where that pressure comes from. Whether it's external or internal.
- 3. Barriers to writing and publishing:** Similarly, all academics experience blocks and barriers to writing and publishing but these barriers change across a career - they're not constant. Early career barriers seem particularly acute and tough to deal with.
- 4. Satisfaction and writing:** Academics experience the lowest satisfaction levels with in the first two years of their careers and their highest at the end. But this doesn't point to a direct link. A range of factors influence satisfaction - not just age or experience.
- 5. Writing schedules:** Whilst 'write daily' might be in every academic productivity handbook, it might not be realistic for today's time-poor scholar. Time blocking is today's preferred technique - it's also one that is linked to high productivity.
- 6. Writing routines and systems:** Finding a personal productivity system of some kind increases productivity, satisfaction and seems to help authors cope better with the stresses and strains of an academic life.

About Prolifiko

We hope you found this research interesting and of practical benefit. So what's next?

You might be a scholar hoping to improve your own writing practice, a publisher looking to innovate your author services or an educator looking to design new support interventions for your scholarly writers.

If you're interested in what we do and think our experience and research could help, talk to us. Using the data in this research combined with the systems-based methodology we've developed to help authors build productive habits, we can help you:

- > **Develop new products and services based on data insights**
- > **Research author markets and define new ones for existing author services**
- > **Increase the productivity of authors via tailored support packages and training**

We believe that there's no single path to productive writing and content creation, there's many - we help you find yours.

Thanks for reading.

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