30 tips for successful academic research and writing

These tips are in no particular order, apart from number 1, which I consider to be the most important of all.

1. Choose something to research/write about that you are passionately interested in. I find that most of my research and writing tends to spring from wanting to find out more or understand more about a particular phenomenon that intrigues me. In explaining it to myself I end up explaining it to others, hopefully in a new and interesting way that is worthy of publication.

2. Be organised – planning time use is essential when there are many demands on your time.

3. Make sure that you set aside one or more periods of time each week when you devote yourself to research and don’t let other demands impinge on this time.

4. So I can easily see what I need to do and by when, I use a white-board with a ‘to do’ list with tasks listed monthly and their deadlines. I rub off tasks as I complete them (usually with a great sense of accomplishment!). Very low tech, I know, but effective as a visual reminder.

5. Plan your research in chunks: this morning, today, this week, this month, next few months, this year, next three years. Have a clear idea for what you want to achieve in these time periods and try to stick to this as much as you can.

6. I don’t tend to think more than a year ahead when it comes to research outcomes I want to achieve, but I find it helpful to write up at least a one-year research plan at the beginning of each year. Some people may also want to prepare a 3- or 5-year research plan.

7. Be strategic about every bit of research time available. Think about the best use of your time. Difficult cognitive tasks requiring intense thought often need a lengthy period of time, so plan to do these when this is available to you. Easy or less time-intensive tasks such as correcting proofs, editing or formatting a journal article or chapter for submission or reading some materials and taking notes can be fitted in smaller periods of time.

8. Use whatever research time you have to do something, however small the task.

9. Make a start. Once you have an idea for a piece of writing, create a file for it on your computer and write down anything, however rough and however brief, even if it is just a provisional title and some notes about possible content. It can always be polished and developed later or even discarded if you decide eventually not to go ahead with the idea.

10. Organise your writing into different computer files: articles in progress, submitted articles, accepted articles, conference papers, blog posts, book proposals, grant applications etc.

11. Organise your PDF journal article collection under topics in files on your computer.

12. If you are feeling unenthusiastic or have hit a wall – leave that piece of writing for a while and work on another piece of writing.
13. If no external deadline has been set, set yourself deadlines and try to meet these as much as you can, so that you can then move on to the next piece of writing.

14. Use your writing in as many different ways as you can – conference papers, articles/chapters, books, blog posts. Turn the small (unrefereed) pieces into bigger (refereed) pieces whenever you can and vice versa. What starts out as a blog post can be later developed into an article, for example. Conversely some of the main arguments of an article can be used in one or more blog posts.

15. Never let a conference/seminar paper stay a conference/seminar paper – turn it into an article/book chapter as soon as you can. If there is simply not enough substance for a piece that is the length of a journal article or book chapter, consider polishing and referencing the paper appropriately. Once it is at a standard where you consider it ready to be available to others, publish it on your university’s e-repository as a working paper. That way, anyone will be able to access the paper digitally and reference it.

16. Decide on an appropriate journal as you are writing an article and tailor the argument/length to the journal’s requirements before you finish it.

17. Once you think that you have finished a piece of writing and are ready to submit it, put it aside for at least a day and come back and read it again with fresh eyes. You will most probably notice something that could be improved upon. Once you have done this and are feeling happy with the piece, go ahead and submit.

18. Receiving feedback from academic referees on a writing piece or research proposal can sometimes be demoralising. Don’t let negative comments get you down for long. Grit your teeth and revise and resubmit as soon as you can, however tedious it feels. See this as an opportunity to make your piece the very best it can be. If the article has been rejected, take a good hard look at whether the referees’ comments are valid and if necessary, revise and then submit it to another journal. Remember that all successful academic writers have received negative feedback at times: that is simply part-and-parcel of academic writing and publishing.

19. Rather than simply deleting material when you are editing a piece of writing, make ‘edits’ computer files into which to ‘paste’ this material when you cut it (I make several edits files under topics). You never know when you may be able to use this material somewhere else.

20. Think about how one writing piece can lead to another as you are writing it.

21. Make sure that your abstract is well-written and will lead others to your work.

22. Keep on top of the latest research published in the journals you use for your research. One easy way to do this is to sign up to email alerts with the publishers of the journals and you will be notified by them of the contents of each new issue.

23. Inspiration for research can come from many places. Attending conferences and seminars and reading the latest academic literature in your field are all extremely important, but so are other strategies. As a sociologist, I have generated many ideas from listening to good quality radio programs, reading newspapers and my favourite online sites and blogs regularly and engaging in social media such as Twitter and Facebook with people interested in the topics I research (see more on social media at no. 25).
24. Connect, connect, connect. Publicise your research and make connections with other researchers as much as you can. Make contact with others working in areas related to your interests even if they are in different departments or in other universities. Join relevant research networks or start your own.

25. Strengthen your online presence. Think about using social and other digital media to promote your research, engage with the community and make academic connections. Set up a profile on Academia.edu at the barest minimum. Make sure your university webpage is kept up-to-date with your latest publications and research projects. Write blog posts (if you don’t want to commit to your own blog, do guest posts for others’ blogs or for online discussion forums), sign up to Twitter and relevant Facebook pages, put your PowerPoints on SlideShare, make Pinterest boards.

26. Use digital bookmarking sites such as Scoop.it, Pinterest, Delicious or Bundlr to save interesting material you have found on the web.

27. Use a computerised online reference manager such as Endnote, Zotero or Mendeley. Get in the habit of loading citations straight into this each time as soon as you come across them.

28. Think carefully about who you collaborate with on research before agreeing to do so. Good collaborators will add immensely to your own work: bad ones will make your life difficult and you won’t be happy with the outputs you produce.

29. Seek out the advice or mentorship of more experienced academics whose research you respect.

30. Take regular walks/runs/bike rides. This will not only keep you physically fit but will also provide a mental space to think through an argument or come up with new ideas. Some of my best ideas have come when I have been in motion and my thoughts are unencumbered.

Further Resources

PhD2Published: http://www.phd2published.com
Writing an article in 12 weeks: http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/tomprof/posting.php?ID=1107
Getting published: what academics need to know (advice about books only): http://www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education-network/blog/2011/apr/27/getting-published-academics
How to publish your journal paper: http://www.apa.org/monitor/sep02/publish.aspx

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