WORKING LIFE

By **Jeffrey J. McDonnell**

The 1-hour workday

When I was an assistant professor, I felt constantly overwhelmed. I had classes to teach, relationships with new colleagues to navigate, a lab group to assemble, and an infant at home—not to mention research to conduct and papers to publish. To get ahead, I took on any opportunities that were offered, including membership on various editorial boards and professional committees. Despite working like a madman, my productivity as measured by paper output was meager. I simply could not find time in my day for undistracted writing. And when I did find the time after an extended stretch away from writing, the warm-up period to get back into the paper was often long, further slowing my progress.

At first I thought that this kind of frustration was routine for academic researchers. But as the years passed, I noticed a few senior colleagues who published with impressive regularity and always had a paper in the works. When I asked them what their secret was, I found that they prioritized doing small amounts of focused writing every day. I've since developed my own version of this approach. I call it the 1-hour workday, referring to the short, sacrosanct period when I do what I see as the "real" work of academia: writing papers.

"I wake up early, make an espresso, and write until I'm spent."

First thing in the morning is when I'm at my mental best, and when I'm still most in control of my time, so I now use the first hour of my day to write. For me, it's best done from home. I've developed something of a ritual: I wake up early, make an espresso, and write until I'm spent—or until distractions like email or the day's deadlines and meetings start to intrude. This is usually about an hour, some days a little less and some days more. I've found that, like hitting a ball in golf, regular writing is easier if I tee it up. I plan my early morning writing the night before. It is in my calendar and on my to-do list, with details about which paper and section I will be working on.

This routine has transformed my work life. Instead of the frustration that frequently plagued me early in my career, now—no matter how work proceeds after I've completed my writing time—I go home at the end of the day with the satisfaction of having accomplished something.

I have in no way mastered the writing game, but my 1-hour workday has certainly increased my academic output. And by keeping me focused and in practice, it has improved the quality of my writing and made the process much more enjoyable. It also offers an opportunity for deep thinking. I remember rarely having any such thinking time when I started out as a professor, but now I find that my daily keystrokes can lead to new ideas. When I string together days of successful writing, ideas flow and new connections present themselves even when I'm away from my keyboard, particularly on my bike ride to work or when I'm reading for pleasure.

Many days, "writing" means editing and revising the work of others. This work can sometimes be a slog, but I keep my spirits up by thinking of it as a game of table tennis. My goal is to return the serve—when done quickly, this greatly improves the game.

In any sport, one must stay toned and conditioned. If I fall out of practice, I quickly lose that fitness, and my writing and editing become labored. So, even though distractions abound, I protect that daily workout at the keyboard during the first precious work hour of the day. I've learned that writing does not need long stretches of uninterrupted time. Focus and regularity are what matter. I now advise my Ph.D. students and postdocs who are going on to faculty positions to adopt daily writing as an early-career habit so that they don't repeat my years of writing frustration. At any career stage, a daily writing ritual can help improve performance—and, perhaps most importantly, job satisfaction. ■

Jeffrey J. McDonnell is a professor in the School of Environment and Sustainability at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Canada, and Sixth Century Chair at the University of Aberdeen in the United Kingdom. *He thanks his Ph.D. students and postdocs for feedback.*

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