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ADVICE

How to Cope With Multiple-Project Paralysis

By Joli Jensen

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ISTOCK

t's like I'm paralyzed," a colleague emailed to me. "I have so many writing projects I don't know where to start."

Yet another fretted: "I'm spinning plates. Everything is whirling around in the air, but nothing's getting finished."

“I It's that time of the year, when classes are over and academics are preparing to spend the summer writing. But writing what, exactly? As director of a faculty writing program, I work with many colleagues who describe themselves as besieged by multiple unfinished writing commitments.

In previous columns, I've written about common barriers to scholarly productivity: the [“myth of one more source,”](#) the [three techniques](#) to tame an unwieldy project, the challenge of [finding time](#) to write amid heavy teaching obligations. But until now, I haven't tackled “multiple-project paralysis” — that is, when you have so many potential or actual writing projects that you are unable to make headway on any of them.

As a writer, you can take action only in the present moment. The past and the future, the potential projects and their possible outcomes, the deadlines and their consequences — all of that is in your head. Project paralysis takes hold when you are trying to write in the present moment but multiple versions of each project are flooding your mind. You are thinking about writing, revising, avoiding, or dreading each of them, all at once. And the longer you stay stuck, the worse it feels.

It's hard to silence the clamoring voices [feeding your anxiety](#) and escape the paralysis. But you can take steps to organize all of those projects competing for your time and attention.

Most scholarly writers need calm, contemplative focus so that they can turn abstract concepts into concrete words. So first, accept reality: You can write only one thing at a time. When you sit down to write, only one project should fill your mind. The trick is to arrange your work schedule to make that happen.

How?

You should already be scheduling your writing sessions for the period of the day when you are at your peak energy. In his [1999 book](#) on academic writing, *The Clockwork Muse*, Eviatar Zerubavel suggested spending a week keeping track of when you feel most and least productive, and then using that knowledge to identify your best hours for writing.

Adapting his ideas in my [2017 book](#) on academic writing, *Write No Matter What*, I proposed a system in which you write during the hours of the day when you are most energetic and productive — what I call your “A time.” What works best for most academics is to use their A time for brief (15 minutes long), frequent writing sessions six days a

week. B time is for tasks that require alertness and focus but not necessarily your very best energies, while C time is for rote work that doesn't require much creativity.

Applied to multiple-project paralysis, here's how this system works:

- Identify a single project on your list, and devote your A time — your [peak period](#) of creative energy — *entirely* to writing on that project, and that project alone.
- Use your B time — when you feel alert but not at your peak — for low-contact tasks related to your other writing commitments. Things like outlining a project, doing research on the topic, organizing your files, or just reflecting on the work. That way, rather than just worrying fruitlessly (and constantly) about not working on the other projects, you're finding ways to keep them organized and waiting in the wings.
- C time is for routine tasks, which need not be project-related. You could even use your C time to take a complete break from writing and do something crazy like exercise, relax, and spend time with friends.

The next question is: Which one of your many projects should you choose for your A time? Here are three selection strategies:

No. 1: Harvest low-hanging fruit. Pick your easiest-to-complete project. Which one just needs some brief focused attention to move forward? This strategy gives you immediate results: one fewer plate in the air. It also reminds you that you are a competent writer, warmed up and ready to tackle the next project in line. A successful completion is energizing, and helps keep [writing demons](#) at bay.

No. 2: Eat dessert first. Which of your many projects is the most appealing, fun, and engaging? Do that one first to end your writing stalemate. There's no virtue (and little reward) in turning academic writing into a grim slog. Why not [pick the project](#) that you most want to write? This strategy affirms that you chose your topic, field, and academic life for good reasons. Writing about something meaningful embodies those reasons and is inherently rewarding. Why not eat dessert first?

No. 3: Do some triage. The project troubling you the most is usually the one you are not even trying to tackle, probably for unclear reasons. In my experience, multiple-project paralysis is often caused by a single problematic writing commitment that is gumming up the works. In order to avoid that problematic project, you allow other commitments to accumulate around it. Then nothing gets done because you believe you "should" be doing that one project that you don't feel ready or able to do.

The triage strategy breaks the logjam. Start by asking yourself: *Which writing project is troubling me the most? Why? Is there a particular aspect of it that I am avoiding? And what can I do about it?*

I've spent far too much of my writing life mired in commitments that were not right for me, so I'm a big believer in abandoning toxically stalled projects. I advocate freeing yourself to write what you want.

Likewise, I've counseled many colleagues whose project paralysis stems from their unconscious avoidance of a particular writing commitment. Once they realize what is going on — and deal with it directly and effectively — they are freed to write. Specific [techniques can help](#) you reframe, relinquish, or recommit to a stalled project.

If a certain stalled project is the reason for your multiple-project paralysis, it might help to free-write about why you don't want to do it. What is frustrating, repellent, or scary about it? What kinds of writing myths does it stir up? Keep free-writing until you come to some kind of resolution: Do you want to do it? And if so, can you now recommit to it as an A-time project? Or can you reframe it so it is less aversive to you, more like dessert? Or should you put it aside altogether, and give your attention to another project that is easily completed (low-hanging fruit) or more fun to do (dessert)?

Sometimes you just have to accept that a writing commitment you made, with good intentions, is now standing in your way. Either do it or let it go. But don't let it keep you stuck.

OK, so you've chosen your A-time project. But how do you quell the anxiety caused by all the undone projects you still aren't working on?

You might try using your B time to set up an organizational system like the one [David Allen describes](#) in his 2002 classic, *Getting Things Done*. Basically, Allen recommends organizing all undone projects into small, concrete steps, and neatly filing them into folders or boxes, with a detailed action plan for each step. Then they can calmly wait their turn for your attention. You can touch base with those projects briefly (if you want) during B times, knowing that their time will surely come.

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