

# 1

## Down but Not Out What It Means to Be Stuck

*“Be a lamp unto yourself.”*

—The Buddha

Commitment isn't Ana's problem. A runner and an early riser, she's carved out plenty of time in the early morning to get her writing done. It's true, she's not really alert at that hour, so she usually doesn't produce her best writing. In fact, her brain doesn't seem to get clicking until sometime after 3:00 p.m., at which point she usually has to rework whatever she did in the morning. This is especially true if she's stayed up late the night before, which she does a few times a week—often an idea hits her late at night and she scrambles to write everything down before it floats away. She knows the morning's not her best time, “but look at what the best writers do, Michelle,” she says, “Kant, Hemingway, Nabokov—they all got up early.” So, she does too.<sup>1</sup>

For her part, Pria *loves* the morning, and she's got a nice little routine to get herself going. She used to just fritter away her first hour of writing going through email or neatening up the sunroom where she works. But now she has a cup of tea, listens to three Gregory Porter songs, and plops right down in her seat. She pulls up what she worked on the day before, reviews it, and cleans it up a little before moving on. But often, an hour and a half later, Pria's writing time is up, and she finds herself feeling tired and bewildered. She's polished that last paragraph to a deep and glowing shine and reading it would make your heart sing. But she does that at every writing session, so she never creates more than a few new sentences for the following paragraph. It doesn't help that Pria's advisor is waiting for a chapter from her and has been for weeks. She can't stand the idea of disappointing him, so she keeps writing. But *she can't stand the idea of disappointing him*. So, she never writes more than that one, perfect paragraph.

Darnell, on the other hand, will do anything he can to avoid sitting down to write. He has a beautifully organized office in the basement of his house—cozy and warm; it gives him just the right amount of solitude without making him feel isolated. He turns the computer on, it's true. But he has a wide and infinitely expandable array of "set-up" activities that he likes to do before getting started. In addition to checking his email and running a few loads of laundry, he also likes to read a blog or two about writing, "just to get my juices flowing," he says. His advisor is pretty hands off "so there's no pressure there," he tells me, and then he pauses: "But sometimes it feels like I'm just out there on my own." By the time Darnell does finally settle down to write, he usually only has about twenty minutes before he has to go upstairs and help get the kids ready for school. At that point, he pours out words in a panicked rush and has no idea what to do with the material. It literally pains him to look at the confused mess of words he's produced, so he usually decides it's all trash, crumples it up, and throws it away in disgust. The next day he comes back, opens his email, and does the same thing all over again.

Ana, Pria, and Darnell are all facing the same simple, scary situation: several times a week they sit down to write, but each time they do . . . they get stuck. Some of them do exactly what the research says they should to increase their productivity: they schedule and protect their writing time; they write regularly throughout the week, and they work in a dedicated writing space. Nevertheless, each of them follows a set of steps that leaves them ultimately unproductive: Ana "writes twice," constantly redoing her work later in the afternoon. Pria begins every day by reviewing her previous work, which distracts and snares her rather than prompts her to move on to new ideas. And Darnell, after dithering away most of his writing time, creates huge amounts of material but is at a loss as to how he should process it. In each instance, they find that, despite their best efforts, they've made little progress on their work, and in some instances, find themselves behind where they were before they started. And each of them says the same thing: that it's hard to tell what's worse—how slowly they seem to make progress or how badly they feel about themselves as a result.

Some version of this scenario—where you show up, struggle to write, and seemingly have little to show for it—is familiar to many academic writers, although the form it takes is particular to each one of us. Perhaps you finish manuscripts but tend to hold on to them, revising and tweaking, missing important deadlines in your search for perfection. Maybe you are delighted by your research and overwhelmed with ideas, but unable, when you write them down, to make sense and order of what's on the page. You might be someone who delays writing until the last possible minute, then forces yourself through marathon writing sessions that leave you depleted, unsatisfied with the work, and terrified to share it. For my own part, I have little trouble getting started, but find that self-doubt worms its way into my thoughts. So I'm sometimes unable to move past the first few minutes of writing. Regardless of the specifics, the result for writers who get stuck is frustration, disappointment, and delay.

There is no way to eliminate the considerable work that academic writing requires. The nature of writing and the professional context in which academic

writing takes place, means that any scholar trying to produce a manuscript is facing a lengthy and arduous process. But what makes writing even more difficult and terrifying—for these three and many academics—is that they have not thought explicitly and systematically about their writing process and how it's affected by that context. Ana, for example, has chosen the wrong time of day to do her work, in deference to a “rule” about when people should write. As a result, she works inefficiently, often repeating her writing sessions later in the day when she's feeling more generative. Pria, on the other hand, becomes especially anxious about writing when she knows that her advisor is going to see the end product and so repeats the same work over and over. And Darnell becomes immobilized when his ideas don't come out pristine and polished. In each case, the cause of their problems lies not merely in the thinking work required, but in the expectations they're responding to, their use of a process that doesn't work for them, and the fear and overwhelm they feel as a result.

This book is designed to help you uncover your *own* writing process—so you can more easily manage your writing barriers and get more satisfaction and pleasure from your writing. Writing process is nothing more than the steps you take to move from ideas in your head to words on a page. And clarity about how you do that will help you better understand how you get stuck and how to get *unstuck* and make progress on your manuscripts. This may seem unlikely because our writing process involves a bunch of decisions that seem trivial at first glance. What could it matter whether you write the first draft by hand or on the keyboard? Tackle your reader's reports alone in your office or with the buzz of quiet conversation in a café? Read yesterday's writing first or dive right into writing a new section? Choices like these can seem so insignificant, mechanical even, and you may be only dimly aware that they are choices at all. Yet small though they may seem, these steps form the building blocks of our writing process and have a significant impact on our experience of writing: they shape the challenges we face while engaged in it and influence how quickly we're able to overcome those challenges.

When trying to develop our writing process, our impulse is often to look to others for guidance. We wouldn't be scholars after all if we didn't appreciate how many of the world's problems can be solved by a good book. Yet when we turn to outside sources for help with the writing process, we're often disappointed. Universities provide minimal training in how to develop and implement a writing process. Advice from colleagues and advisors, although well-meaning, may not fit our circumstances or our method of working. And while writing guidebooks can be useful, they can also trap us in unhelpful patterns (like Pria's early morning writing) because the research says it's the “best practice.” Most importantly, turning first to outside authorities to better understand our writing process robs us of the opportunity to develop our sense of professional authority—our confidence in ourselves, our mastery of our subject, and our understanding of our process. That sense of authority is a crucial but underappreciated element of our professional success and satisfaction.

*Becoming* suggests taking the opposite approach. That where writing is concerned, you act as a lamp unto yourself: before seeking outside guidance on

what your writing process should look like, you instead begin with an inward look—to uncover the writing process you already have. There's already a writer inside of you. They are not perfect. They might not even enjoy writing all that much. And they likely don't know everything there is to know about it. But if ten years of coaching academics has taught me anything, it's that you know more than you think. That's because you already have a writing process that feels easier and more natural to you. But for reasons we'll discuss in the next chapter, that process can get buried under a mountain of anxiety, uncertainty, and overwhelm. This book offers one way to dig yourself out from under that mountain and walk toward the writer you already are. Let's get started by taking a look at what's getting in the way.

## What It Means to Be Stuck

The relentless blinking of the cursor on white space; the manuscript that stays the same for weeks; the frustrated writer draped across her desk in misery; these are the images (and perhaps the memories) that tend to pop up in our heads when we think about the problems that writers face. These vivid scenes are how we often visualize writer's block—as a wretched, pitiable, and perhaps all too familiar state in which, no matter how hard you try, the words do not come. The fundamental idea behind this popular vision of writer's block is that we are at a loss for words. That we lack inspiration, or just don't know what to say. While there are certainly times when this is the challenge we're facing, this common notion of "block" is too narrow to capture the variety of difficulties we face as writers. More useful is the concept of being stuck: that is, deliberately or unintentionally doing things that keep us from moving our project forward.<sup>2</sup> In other words, stuck doesn't include those times when we can't quite figure out what to do: when we're having trouble organizing our thoughts or can't find the theoretical framework that makes the most sense. Those are instances when we're stumped—puzzled, and perhaps moving more slowly than we'd like—but still working at it and moving forward. Stuck, on the other hand, is when the things we're doing are preventing us from making progress.

During my time as a writing coach, I've observed at least four forms of being stuck. The first is simply **Not Writing**.<sup>3</sup> This differs from the traditional notion of Writer's Block, where we try to write and are unable to do so, while Not Writers do not even sit down at the desk. One of the reasons most cited by academics for Not Writing is a lack of time (Boice & Jones, 1984), and it is no wonder. Between caretaking responsibilities, course prep, classroom teaching, office hours, committee meetings, advising, and manuscript reviews, it can feel impossible to find time to write. Recent reports suggest that it's not unusual for academics to work a sixty-hour week (Morgan, 2012; Diers-Lawson, 2013; Flaherty, 2014; Roney, 2017; McKenna, 2018; Seamons, 2019). Given these circumstances, it's no surprise that many of us begin the day with the best intentions for our writing, then look up

a few minutes later to see that the day is over, and we never even opened our document.

Not Writing can also afflict scholars who have plenty of time and know it. These are perhaps the most tormented Not Writers because they are often too embarrassed or ashamed to ask for help. Busy Not Writers have the “excuse” of having no time in their schedule to protect their egos. But procrastinating Not Writers—those whose homes are clean, whose closets are organized and filled, like mine is, with blankets they crocheted while avoiding their writing—those Not Writers are often grappling with a level of self-doubt and shame that can be debilitating. And the line between Not Writers who have plenty of time available and those who have none can be a very thin one indeed.

Not Writing can even afflict scholars who have a firmly established writing habit. One of the triggers of this kind of Not Writing I tend to see is when something happens that shatters a scholar’s confidence so that they can’t get back to writing. And given that academics write in a context of constant potential criticism, it’s not unusual for this to happen. The disruptor might be a particularly harsh comment from an advisor. It might be experiencing (or even witnessing) public humiliation while giving a presentation. Damning reviews are also a common source of writing stuckness. One scholar who worked with Robert Boice explained that

my writing was moving along nicely until the rejection of my book manuscript came. I had put my whole soul into that thing. . . . Angst is the result. I don’t have the will to get back to writing, so I’m getting further and further behind where I should be. My general state of apprehension is growing day by day; once I get back to writing, the pace will have to be explosive. Still, I’m not sure, given what the reviewers said, that I can write anything outstanding. (Boice, 1994, p. 2)

The fear of rejection and disapproval is also one of the motivators behind **Side Writing**, a second way we can get stuck. Side Writing can be especially disruptive for those who are just establishing a writing habit and have been told (by people such as myself) that “anything that moves your work forward is writing.” It’s true that thinking, reading, analysis, note-taking, outlining, free-writing—these and other tasks that scholars routinely dismiss as “not real” writing are core, foundational writing acts. Without them, the composition of prose cannot take place. The distinction between Side Writing and moving your work forward is that Side Writing is what we do when we are *technically* writing but doing so to avoid the more challenging work required to advance the development of our ideas. In other words, Side Writing is writing in disguise—a writing-specific version of “workcrastination.”

One of the clearest indications that you may be in Side Writing is that you find yourself performing the same activity over and over again. One of its most seductive forms is repeated data analysis—what scholar is not compelled by the need to rerun equations (with perhaps another variable), to double-check

interpretations, to review primary sources just *one last time*? Because these acts form the basis for the ideas we're developing through our writing, scholars often perform them over and over: not necessarily to enhance their understanding of the phenomenon in question, but to calm their fears about having "missed" something. At other times Side Writing shows up as repeat revision, as with Pria who can't stop making the perfect paragraph. Unlike Not Writers or Binge Writers, who experience quite acutely the negative consequences of being stuck, Side Writers may not be aware that there's a problem until they have been writing for a fairly long time. When they do realize it, they may be confused and angry (with themselves) for the delay, even though they find it difficult to stop.

If we Don't Write or Side Write for too long, we can find ourselves in the unhappy position of **Binge Writing**, a third form of being stuck. This is the pattern of not writing for long periods, and then writing in painfully long chunks (Kellogg, 1986). It's the thirty-page seminar paper written in the twenty-four hours before it's due; it's the slowly moving download bar and the quickly ticking clock as you and everyone else researching your topic submit an online federal grant application three minutes before the deadline. The next time you board a flight to a conference, see if you can spot Binge Writing in the seats around you: it's the laptop that's snatched from the backpack, whipped open before the tray tables are down, and kept on for the duration of the flight in a tense race to finish the paper before the panel starts. Perhaps you wouldn't need to look up from your seat on the plane to spot the Binge Writer. If so, that's because you're in good company.

As Boice points out, Binge Writing is extremely unpleasant—not just because it requires long periods of work, but also because it requires "forcing," that is, compelling ourselves to write long past the point when we want to or are producing anything of much worth. This is a key difference between Binge Writing and falling into Flow. Both can be marked by hyperfocus, a sense that we are totally "in" the writing. But while Flow feels effortless and energized, binging—especially when we do it to meet a deadline—is a grueling, white-knuckle experience. Both forcing and binging, Boice tells us, are damaging strategies, which take much more than they give. His research shows that both "decrease the likelihood of writing again the next day or next week. Both, in the long run, lead to less output and less satisfaction in writing, less quality and originality in the product, and fewer successes with editors than do more temperate, regular schedules of writing" (Boice, 1994, p. 4).

It makes sense that Binge Writing diminishes the quality of our writing. Whatever your natural rhythm, pace, and process for clarifying your ideas, Binge Writing makes that intolerable. Because it is frequently motivated by our need to meet a deadline, Binge Writing necessarily elevates quantity over quality, production over content. It steals away the time we need to think through ideas, pore over implications or contemplate the fit of a single word.<sup>4</sup> In the face of an impending deadline, such considerations become secondary to just getting out something that is less humiliating than the thing you wrote just a

few hours before. As I will illustrate in Chapter 5, this no-nonsense, outcome-oriented mode of thinking is actually useful when refining an essentially finished work. But if we are not yet at that stage of a project, then rushed, forced writing can damage our manuscript.

In short, the problem with getting stuck isn't just (or even, primarily) that it impacts our writing productivity. The more serious problem with getting stuck is it affects the *quality* of our work and our work experience. When we're stuck in Not, Side, and Binge Writing, we're unable to do what's necessary to fully develop our thinking. Messiness and confusion are a natural part of writing. And it's not unusual to find ourselves with plenty of ideas that we're unable to assemble in a way that makes sense. Bolton and Rowland refer to this as "writing chaos" and point out that

all writing, particularly academic, has times when it seems a complete muddle with no possible order, ever. There is so much wildly disparate and dislocated stuff, and yet it all has to have a proper place in the publication. (2014, p. 58)

If we're stuck, we don't have room for the natural, inescapable moments when we do not understand our thoughts and must labor through the process of becoming clear to ourselves.

In addition, these forms of being stuck diminish our capacity for producing elegant prose. Since we are not, as scholars, known for our graceful and readable style, we might not initially be concerned about that. Yet, as Stephen Pyne points out, style is not "merely decorative or ornamental, any more than are feathers on a bird. Style performs work. Whatever its loveliness or ostentation, it is what allows the creature to fly, to attract mates, to hide from predators, to be what it is" (Pyne, 2009, p. 10). In other words, style directly influences the clarity and impact of our arguments (Pyne, 2009; Narayan, 2012; Sword, 2012). When writing is rushed, there is no time to consider this seemingly less important element of writing, much less to use it to strengthen our arguments. What gets lost, as a result, is the specificity of our terms, the precision of our arguments, and the clarity and significance of our conclusions.

The last form of stuck that I'll mention is **Endless Writing**. Kissing cousin to Side Writing, Endless Writing is what happens when scholars just can't let our work go. It's what we do when the thought of other people seeing our work is so abhorrent that we cannot bring ourselves to initiate the most important stage of the writing process—the moment when we share our ideas with others.

It does not pay to rank the evil wrought by these forms of being stuck. Whichever one you are experiencing at the moment is likely to feel like the worst one, and may the heavens help you if you're experiencing more than one at a time. Together they can seem like the Four Horsemen of the Academic Apocalypse, a thundering quartet of ruination, each one delivering its own exquisite form of suffering. *Not Writing* ultimately does the most straightforward damage for scholars whose promotion and tenure depend on publication.

Without writing, none of the material, psychological, and reputational rewards of traditional institutions are available to those scholars. *Endless Writing*, though, is the most tragic. Those who suffer from it often have everything you'd want in a piece of scholarship: deeply researched, complex, beautifully rendered ideas that, while imperfect, would nevertheless make a rich contribution if only they were released into the world. *Side Writing* is the heartbreaker, a charming, sugar-tongued liar who allows you to fool yourself until it's too late.

But of all the forms of being stuck, *Binge Writing* is the most pernicious. Like *Side Writing*, its disadvantages are hidden until long after they've begun to make their mark. Binge Writing is a habit that can be maintained over many years and is even appreciated as a sign of true professional commitment and intellectual grit. But the truth is, its slow, sly deterioration of our natural approach to writing can eventually make us hate the whole process and sap our passion for the thing we once loved.

## Flow and Forward Writing

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Biblical harbingers of Conquest, War, Famine, and Death might seem a bit histrionic to those who have never been stuck in their writing. More troubling is the fact that some of you may be reading these words and thinking to yourself that I have not described being stuck but have merely described writing itself. "If not for the writer's Four Horsemen," you might be asking, "Then what?"

There are two alternatives that writers can aim for. The first is what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls **Flow**. Flow is that magical moment when everything works. When the words come easily and ideas slip together, seemingly of their own accord. It's those times when the entire frame of an argument becomes magically, radically clear to us. So we steal a few minutes just to get it all down—then look up and find an hour has passed. Csikszentmihalyi explains that Flow is

what the sailor holding a tight course feels when the wind whips through her hair, when the boat lunges through the waves like a colt—sails, hull, wind, and sea humming a harmony that vibrates in the sailor's veins. (1990, p. 3)

In other words, Flow is that strange combination of tightly focused attention and completely open awareness that makes us feel, not just connected to, but totally in tune with the writing. In moments like these, our ideas fall so neatly into place, we can almost hear them clicking together as we write. Flow doesn't happen every time we write—but we can learn certain strategies that prime us for falling into Flow and increase the ease with which we're able to do so (Perry, 1999). Yet even the most skillful, prolific writers do not experience this all the time. And if we imagine Flow to be the only acceptable alternative to Stuck, we will be disappointed.



Another kind of writing we can shoot for is **Forward Writing**. Forward Writing is the regular, steady, and (usually) incremental development of your project, through the articulation, elaboration, clarification, or support of your ideas. Forward Writing pushes you past where you were when you sat down to work, but it does not look the same each time it happens. It might involve writing a certain number of words or pages per day, but often it does not. At the beginning of a project, Forward Writing might take five minutes and involve sketching a mind map on a napkin, with cryptic notes that only you can understand. It can happen serendipitously and, in a flash, while you're sitting on the floor of the library, reading a book you happened upon while drifting down the stack to see if any nearby titles look useful. Forward Writing might be that one sentence, crafted with a delicacy and precision you've been aiming at for years, that begins "In this book, I argue that..." Forward Writing might also be the seventeen hours it takes you to reread your entire dissertation, with that one sentence argument by your side on an index card, checking to make sure that each paragraph, each section, and each chapter is working to support that argument.

Sometimes, Forward Writing is the painful, paradoxical realization that everything you have been writing has gone utterly off course, and you must now cut the bulk of your argument. This writing has become a pet of yours, despite its irrelevance and the damage it does to your argument. But as poet and essayist Annie Dillard (1989) rightly insists,

This writing weakens the work. You must demolish the work and start over. You can save some of the sentences, like bricks. It will be a miracle if you can save some of the paragraphs, no matter how excellent in themselves or hard-won. You can waste a year worrying about it, or you can get it over with now. (Are you a woman, or a mouse?) (1989, p. 4)

Forward Writing, then, is not magic, although when we're lucky, it can feel, like Csikszentmihalyi's flow, quite magical. Often, however, writing is mundane. Perhaps tedious. Sometimes painful. And very often, Forward Writing is mysterious. "When you write," Dillard suggests that

you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner's pick, a wood-carver's gouge, a surgeon's probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you have found yourself in deep new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year. (Dillard, 1989, p. 3)

Dillard elegantly asserts a fundamental truth: that even Forward Writing is difficult. That it is a creative process, one over which we have only partial control.

Scholars do not, as a profession, tend to spend much time on the idea that the work we're engaged in does not bend to our will alone. Instead, we tend to maintain a false division between scholarship and so-called creative

writing, between intellect and imagination. Yet we experience the incoherence and unwieldiness of the creative process each time we sit and write, whether the words flow like butter, or refuse to come at all. In the face of this mystery, then, amid a process that can only be coaxed and never fully controlled, how do we keep from getting stuck? How do we find our way to Forwarding Writing?

## The Promise of Writing Process

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Many academic writing guidebooks point out that our writing problems come from our failure to write regularly—a problem that can be solved by productivity and time management protocols. Thanks to this work, we know that scheduling shorter, more frequent writing sessions, telling someone what we plan to accomplish, and then telling them what happened all make it more likely that we'll establish and stick to a regular writing schedule. These works have helped countless scholars plan their writing projects (Zerubavel, 1999; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008), write regularly (Boice, 1990; Gray, 2005; Silvia, 2007; Jensen, 2017; Sword, 2017), learn the conventions of academic writing (Belcher, 2009; Goodson, 2013; Hayot, 2014), and develop accountability measures to support them through the creation of the manuscript (Silvia, 2007). This literature has given us a much clearer idea of the strategies that are most likely to help us show up for writing and have developed crucial insights into a profession that has all but ignored the topic for years. What this literature is less clear on is what to do once we've shown up for our writing.

*Becoming* picks up where that work left off. Drawing on the research on writing barriers, as well as my work coaching and leading writing retreats for academics, this book examines why writing feels so scary and immobilizing. And it explores how we can increase the chances that we will dive into writing—even when doing so feels terrifying. It suggests that one reason academic writing is so challenging is that the conditions under which scholars work encourage us to forgo, rather than follow our natural writing process. So one way we can move from fearful to Forward Writing is to uncover our process and learn to trust it. To help with that work, I offer a single reflective tool—the Writing Metaphor—that you can use to explore and elaborate your particular writing process and determine which strategies will fit how you work.

Understanding our writing process can't eliminate all the challenges we face. Some are inherent to our writing experience, while others are ingrained in academic culture and social hierarchy. So, we can expect these challenges to remain with us regardless of age, experience, or seniority. But knowing one's process can help change our relationship with those challenges: the way we *think* about them; the way we *feel* about them; and the way we *behave* when they pop up. Once we understand and, more importantly, trust our process, we have a greater chance of facing and moving past those challenges, instead

of running away from them. We might still feel uncomfortable when those challenges arise. But we'll be less likely to be derailed by them when they do.

*Becoming* is not the first work to consider the emotional and psychological barriers of academic writing—in fact, it gratefully draws on those books to offer the analysis I give here.<sup>5</sup> Yet it differs from those books in three key ways. First, its ultimate purpose is not to boost your productivity. It's possible that what you read here *will* help you publish more quickly. But if it does so, that will be a secondary effect. The true aim of this book is to expand your sense of ownership of the writing process: to cultivate the awareness that your writing belongs to you. And to strengthen your sense that you have the right and the capacity to make good decisions about the process you use and the ideas you communicate. The stronger your sense that your writing belongs to you, the more writing becomes your route to professional security: to greater pleasure. To deeper excitement about your research. To the simple comfort that comes from not panicking every time you sit down to write.

The second way *Becoming* differs from other work is that it sees following one's process as an act of power. In an environment where writing is the gateway to most of the symbolic and material rewards of our profession, the work that once excited us—thinking and talking about ideas and how they can change us and the world—can easily devolve into a competition for approval. Writing can get reduced to something we “have to do to get tenure.” And the joys of intellectual play—making mistakes, exploring dead ends, and pursuing outrageous claims—become too risky to engage in because they threaten our professional reputation and progress. Yet despite these circumstances, *Becoming* suggests that it's possible to reclaim your writing as a practice of freedom. That each time we honor our writing process, we refuse the conditions and logic that make writing so terrifying. And that, paradoxically, doing so will make scholars more, not less likely to meet institutional demands for writing productivity.

Finally, *Becoming* differs from other writing guides in that it does not recommend any particular “best practice.” Instead, it offers a reflective tool to help you better understand yourself as a writer—so that you can then better understand which “best practice” is best for you. In taking this approach, I am strongly influenced by the work of scholars such as Kamler and Thomson who suggest that the true solution to helping scholars successfully navigate the hurdles of writing is to “[move] beyond a focus on tools and techniques to the discursive practices of becoming a scholar” (2008, p. 507). *Becoming* tries to do so by demonstrating that, no matter where you are in your scholarly life, it is useful to first turn inward to discern what you need to enjoy and complete your work.

My hope is that *Becoming* will serve, not as a writing guide, but as a writer's companion. That it will accompany you as you come to understand who you are as a writer and a scholar. I have tried to create, as well as I can in book form, the sense of warm, supportive companionship I always see among scholars when I lead a writing retreat—a feeling that depends in part on scholars'

willingness to share their stories with one another. Therefore, you will find stories and insights from a wide range of scholars—some from published accounts and some from scholars I’ve coached—all describing the emotional and psychological blocks that get in their way, as well as the writing process they use to move past them.<sup>6</sup> I rely on these generously shared stories, not just to illustrate writing challenges and solutions. But more importantly, to remind you that you are not alone: that we are all struggling through this Herculean task alongside one another. And that whatever your burden or worry about writing, it is shared by someone else. I encourage you to share these stories—and your own—with others. And return to them, for comfort and courage, throughout your writing life.

## Chapter Overview: From Problem to Puzzle

While going through this book, I invite you to think of writing as a puzzle rather than a problem: a thorny, maddening one at times—no doubt. But also, one whose solution generates an unbeatable feeling of beauty, pleasure, and satisfaction. To help you do so, Chapter 2 begins by asking not “What’s wrong?” but “What’s happening?” It shows that writing isn’t just a matter of simply transcribing our cleanly worked-out thoughts. Rather, it’s a complex, unwieldy process that is more difficult to master than we initially think. And as much as we might dislike it, stumbling is a natural part of that process. “So what?” you might wonder. “Who cares what’s happening when I write?” My experience coaching academics suggests that knowing why writing is difficult provides us with the intellectual armor—that is, the conceptual language and framework—for analyzing rather than pathologizing our writing struggles. Once we understand the nature of the challenge we are facing, it is much easier to address.

Having provided some clarity (or confirmation) of what’s happening when we write, Chapter 3 asks “What could happen instead?” It answers that question by elaborating on the concept of writing process. In describing its stages I include examples from a wide range of scholars to show how unique the writing process is to each person, as well as how following your process helps you get past the emotional, technical, and strategic challenges described in the previous chapter. I hope that you’ll finish this chapter with a clearer sense of the “big picture” of any writing project and the ability to identify where *you* are in your projects at any given time.

Chapter 4 is where we dive into the work of uncovering your particular writing process. It’s here that I describe the tool of the Writing Metaphor and walk you through the steps of developing your own. Doing so is like taking the bare sketch of yourself outlined in Chapter 3 and filling it in with detail, shade, and color. The Writing Metaphor takes the generalized model of the writing process and makes it your own, by revealing what you’re already doing as a writer that feels natural and helps you move past challenges. Be prepared: The Writing Metaphor will also reveal what’s *not* working for you

and often give you insight into why. At this point, it will be tempting to judge, criticize, and ask yourself “How do I fix this?”

I encourage you to maintain your sense of writing as a puzzle, not a problem, and ask yourself instead, “How might I handle this?” That’s the question we tackle in Chapter 5, which describes a method for experimenting with different strategies to see which ones fit and enhance the way you work. It also provides several strategies with which you can experiment. After reading this chapter, you’ll have a method for incorporating new elements into your writing process while staying grounded in the core approach that forms who you are as a writer. You’ll also have a treasure trove of strategies you can return to and experiment with, whenever you find yourself stuck in the future.

The work this book asks of you isn’t easy. It requires time, space, and quiet—exactly the conditions academic institutions make difficult to find. So Chapter 6 concludes by describing how to develop an oppositional writer’s consciousness and use it to create relationships that make it easier to brave the risks of writing.

## Solving the Writing Puzzle: How to Use This Book

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Solving the puzzles that your writing presents will be much easier if you endeavor to adopt three habits of mind while reading this book: the first is a ***spirit of experimentation***. I can promise you that some of these exercises when you first read them and consider them abstractly will seem silly and perhaps even painful. I can also promise you that if you only *think* about them (and how silly they are) they are not likely to help you at all. In describing how professionals make successful changes in their careers, Herminia Ibarra argues that “we learn who we are—in practice, not in theory—by testing reality...We discover the true possibilities by doing” (Ibarra, 2004, p. xii). Similarly, I suggest that the best way to learn who you are as a writer is to actively and fully engage in the exercises.

The second habit of mind that will come in handy while reading this book is ***kindness***. If your response to that last sentence is to wince inwardly, I promise you, you are not alone in your discomfort. One trait I have observed in virtually every writer I have worked with is an unrelenting tendency to judge and punish themselves before they understand. This sharp impatience is not surprising, given that academia valorizes criticism and conflict as the best routes toward knowledge production. However, in this instance, such an approach merely gets in the way. It is, in fact, a weakness, because it prevents true discernment—the ability to see what is happening and imagine alternative possibilities. Working with your Writing Metaphor will affirm what’s working for you and will also point out what’s *not* working. So it can tempt you toward self-judgment. It’s essential therefore that you treat yourself the way you treat your students: with the kind expectation that, of course, you don’t already know everything there is to know. If this approach seems ridiculous, useless, or just

plain pathetic, my suggestion is to be kind to yourself secretly and temporarily, while reading this book—no one will be the wiser.

The final habit of mind that will support you while you read *Becoming* is one that I hope you will grow over time, as you experiment with the ideas in this book. That skill is **trust**. I have yet to work with a writer who did not have some intuitive sense of what worked for them and what did not. It's typically when they ignore that intuition, and instead, try to adhere to external expectations unrelated to their process that they run into the most difficulty. This book asks you to pay attention to what you are telling yourself. It asks you to respect the intuition that is so central to knowledge discovery—and your success as a scholar—and apply it to your writing life.

### Focus Point

1. Many writing challenges are the result of looking to others for writing guidance instead of following our writing process.
2. We're stuck in our writing when we inadvertently or knowingly do things that prevent us from making progress.
3. Being stuck looks different for different scholars at different times.
4. Writing progress isn't always an unimpeded forward movement. Instead, it can also be slow, multidirectional, and uncertain.

### Notes

1. See Popova, M. (2015, October 5). *Famous writers' sleep habits vs. literary productivity, visualized*. The Margina. Last Retrieved April 4, 2022, from <https://www.themarginalian.org/2013/12/16/writers-wakeup-times-literary-productivity-visualization/>
2. In general scholars agree that writer's block involves "the inability to begin or continue writing" (Rose, 1984, 3). But there is still some debate about what writer's block looks like—that is, whether certain behaviors (e.g., procrastination) are an instance of blocking or its cause (see Ahmed, 2019). There is also the occasional assertion that writer's block isn't a real problem, at least not for academics (Silvia, 2007, 45–47). I use the term "stuck"—the one I hear most often from my coaching clients—to describe the wide range of conditions that keep them from writing and cause them to seek out support.

3. Not Writing, as I describe it here, is different from Murray's NotWriting (Hjortshoj, 35–38 referencing Murray), which Murray describes as an essential period of waiting before one begins writing. See Murray, D. M. (1992). *Read to Write: A Writing Process Reader*. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
4. While I describe this condition as deadline driven, upon rereading, it strikes me that this is what it feels like to try to meet publication requirements in general.
5. Recent work by Sword (2017) and Zumbrunn (2021) are among the most helpful of these and forthcoming work by Sword (2023) promises to add to the bounty.
6. These descriptions and stories are taken from my writing retreats, writing workshops, and private coaching clients. Except when indicated, I have changed minor details, names, and identifying information in order to protect their confidentiality.