



How to Thrive as an Academic with Writing Challenges Related to Neurodiversity or Mental Health

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Many folks who struggle with writing simply conclude, “I am a bad writer.” But writing challenges come in all shapes and sizes. In fact, many people who struggle to get writing done still produce excellent writing. Understanding exactly where your areas of challenge are can help you figure out how to address them. See if you can drill down the specifics of your writing challenges using these tools.

Many skills go into producing academic writing, but only those related to knowledge and knowledge production tend to get recognized, taught, and cultivated. Too often scholars who struggle with cognitive and work-related skills are simply assumed to be less intelligent or “not cut out” for academic work. The skills in bold in the list below are typically not addressed directly in academic culture.

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Academic Writing =

- Disciplinary knowledge
- Ability to raise questions
- Ability to situate ideas in terms of previous research
- Ability to contribute unique ideas, methods, findings, etc.
- Ability to plan, manage, and execute projects**
- Advanced reading and information processing**
- Working memory**
- Attention**
- Navigating socio-economic settings, cultural norms, etc.**

PART 1: TAKE INVENTORY

List all of the non-academic challenges that impact your productivity as a writer:

- 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- Etc.

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Please describe your writing process in as much detail as possible using the following prompts. Pretend you are describing your thought process and workflow to an anthropologist.

When I think about writing...

When I prepare to write...

When I sit down to write...

I struggle with:

___ Writing process

___ Writing product (concepts, organization, syntax, "voice," audience awareness, etc.)

___ Both

Which parts of the research and writing process are significantly difficult for you? (check all that apply)

___ Reading and taking notes

___ Pre-writing or outlining

___ Generating first-draft material

___ Editing and revising

___ Incorporating and responding to feedback



Common Challenges (check all that apply)

Mental / Oral / Written Production

- Are you comfortable working out thoughts in your head?
- Are you comfortable expressing your thoughts orally?
- Are you comfortable expressing your thoughts in writing?
- Are you comfortable expressing your thoughts visually?

Executive Function (impacts ability to get the writing done)

- Did you write most of your college and / or graduate papers at the last minute?
- Do you struggle to sit down and write?
- Do you struggle to maintain focus once you sit down to write?
- Do you get sidetracked when you try to switch between tasks?
- Do you have a hard time letting your work go or feeling that it is “done enough?”
- Do you find yourself starting a project over and over, but not really progressing?

Writing Product

- Have you been told that your writing is confusing or incomprehensible?
- Have you been told that your writing betrays a lack of audience awareness?
- Have you been told that your writing is “not scholarly” or lacks appropriate voice?
- Do you get confused when you try to move text around or re-organize your material?

Reading

- Are you a slow reader?
- Do you struggle to retain what you read?
- Do you take notes / record info in ways that are useful to you?



What messages have you received about yourself as a learner over your lifetime? What things have you been told that you're "good" or "bad" at? How do these memories impact your current experience of doing and getting feedback on your academic work?

How do you perceive yourself as a learner? What do you feel your areas of strength and challenge are? How does your self-perception impact your current academic work?

PART 2: TAKE ACTION

Use an iterative process for productivity.

1. Break down projects into tasks.
2. Identify cognitive needs for each task.
3. Identify emotional & logistical challenges.
4. Decide on strategies to address challenges.
5. Track results.
6. Adjust and keep trying new strategies.
7. Build on successes.

"Writing" is composed of many task types. Work to treat them as unique rather than as all the same.

- "Errands" (database search, copying, organizing, etc.)
- Text processing (reading)
- Initial drafting
- Editing
- Seeking and incorporating feedback
- Meetings

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Complete a cognitive needs assessment for each task.

	Perceived challenge level	Attention demands (high—low)	Best location (sound, light, solitude, etc.)	Best time of day
Academic "errands"				
Processing texts				
Initial drafting				
Editing				
Advising meetings				
Other				

For each task:

- Identify anxiety level.
- Identify "stories" or "baggage" about the task.
- Choose strategies for addressing that challenge.
- Report on results of these strategies.
- Based on these results: reuse, retry, adjust, discard.

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Task	Level of anxiety about task (high, medium, low)	Internal obstacles (stories or "baggage")	External obstacles or prerequisites	Strategies for addressing obstacles	Task Completion (All. Some. None)
Ex: revising literature review	High	I got negative feedback on the 1 st draft and I'm avoiding revisiting and revising	I need to go back to the literature and refresh my memory and add in the new sources I found	Re-read feedback and <u>freewrite</u> about my response to it. Organize all literature and divide it into 5 piles to review over 5 days this week	Re-read feedback and did <u>freewriting</u> . Have not started revision yet. Made literature piles and reviewed the first one.

Strategies to Try

The writing process does not have to be a writing-*only* process. Incorporate verbal, visual, and kinesthetic tools into your writing process.

Use a voice recorder or voice transcription to get your thoughts on paper.

Ask for oral feedback and record.

Record advising meetings.

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Turn friends into thought partners. Have them ask (and add your own questions):

- What are you working on?
- What interests you about that?
- Where do you feel stuck?
- Why do you think you got stuck on this bit?
- How does this bit fit into your larger project?

Ask them to summarize what they understood from your answers and what they are still confused about.

Motivate to Regulate

Focus on creating the conditions in your life that diminish the impact of neurocognitive or mental health challenges.
Find a way to acknowledge and reward yourself for the extra work you do.

You Have the Technology

- Dragon Naturally Speaking (voice dictation software)
- Voice Dream
- Endnote
- “Smart” pens
- Scrivener
- Kanbanflow, Trello
- Many others

Ask: Who are You Writing for?

Not everyone deserves a backstage pass to your brain. If you are writing a thesis or dissertation and mentally talking to the top experts in your field, you may be overshooting. If you are worried that the subjects in your studies might object to your analysis or findings, you may be overshooting. In other words, write *for* your audience, but not beyond your audience.



Change the Channel

I see it all the time: a client who is stuck on a project becomes suddenly productive when they have to write a paper for a conference or apply for a job. Taking your mind off a project that is hanging you up can help.

PART 3: SELF-ADVOCATE

Think Strategically About Who Needs to Know What

I cannot make a blanket statement about when it makes sense to disclose information about the mental health or neurodiverse challenges you face. In the U.S. where I work, very few universities have meaningful provisions for learning accommodations at the graduate level, and those that exist for undergraduates (extra time on tests, extended deadlines, note-taking services in class) are not generally meaningful for graduate students. That said, I have seen graduate students successfully apply for additional time in their programs or get program help in finding a new advisor. Supervisors and advisors vary greatly in their supportiveness.

Whatever you decide, however, I think it is always a good policy to stay in close communication. Blowing through deadlines or failing to show up to appointments is likely to frustrate your supervisor and to be interpreted as a lack of commitment, even if the underlying cause is, say, ADD or the beginning of a depressive cycle. Your supervisors and colleagues want to be treated professionally, have a professional stake in your success, and are human beings subject to disappointment.

Write Yourself an Accommodation Plan

Even though awareness of mental health and neurodiversity is growing, there is still plenty of ignorance as well as misconceptions. The more you know about what you need, the better you can communicate with those involved in your education and work.



RESOURCES FOR NEURODIVERGENT ACADEMICS

ON DIAGNOSIS

Diagnosis Only Goes so Far

ON ACCOMMODATIONS

Disabled in Grad School: Why I, Too, Dread “the Accommodations Talk”

The Adjusted Ph.D: What Accommodations Worked for You?

Accommodations in Academia

Invisible No More [on “seeing” and working with invisible disabilities]

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

The #Autistic Buddha: My Unconventional Path to Enlightenment

Neurodiversity and Mental Health. Great article on the relationship between these two related but not identical issues.

Adult ASD: Self Diagnosis or Professional Diagnosis?

Books on ASD

At the Intersection of Gender and Autism Part 1, Part 2, Part 3

On Executive Functioning

Blog Series on Executive Function

Tips for Good Executive Functioning

ADHD

What It’s Like to Have ADHD As a Grown Woman

ADHD Before Modern Medicine

Smart Girls With ADHD

DYSLEXIA

The Dyslexic Grad Student’s Toolbox

Surviving grad school with dyslexia

Tech Tools That Have Transformed Learning With Dyslexia

PROCRASTINATION

Why Procrastinators Procrastinate

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The Procrastination Matrix

PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionism in OCD: When the Pursuit of Success Turns Toxic

SELF-ACCEPTANCE

Brene Brown, shame and vulnerability researcher who has become well known for her powerful TED talks.

Listening to shame

The power of vulnerability

Acceptance as a Well Being Practice

Tara Brach, mindfulness teacher working from a Buddhist framework.

Flourishing from within of self blessing

Healing Self Doubt

FINDING GOOD MENTORS AND NAVIGATING ACADEMIC CULTURE

Why is it so Hard to Find Mentors?

Hiding in Plain Sight: Changing the Unwritten Rules of Academe

THE IMPORTANCE OF AFFECTIVE LABOR IN THE UNIVERSITY

Thanks for Listening. Myra Green. A faculty member reflects on the invisible affective work of teaching and advising

The Political Case for Caring Inside the Academy

Invisible Labor: Exploitation of Scholar of Color in Academia

THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT—OR—YOU HAVE THE TECHNOLOGY

Technical aids can be a huge help in accessing or outputting materials. In addition, there are lots of apps and software that can help you minimize distraction, organize your work, and create structure.

TEXT TO VOICE

Voice Dream. For students who benefit from seeing and hearing text, Voice Dream provides the very useful ability to listen to and annotate texts. Imports just about any type of file.

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VOICE TO TEXT: VOICE DICTATION

Some students struggle so significantly with typing that it slows down their process considerably. Likewise, anyone who types a lot can find themselves dealing with arm and wrist pain. Using voice dictation can increase your speed and cut down on repetitive stress. Note that if you are composing your written work orally, make sure to reread or get another reader to make sure that you are using written rather than oral constructions as these are not exactly the same.

Dragon Naturally Speaking is a highly-regarded dictation software. It requires a small amount of training and you need to learn the program's voice commands, but it can allow you to control everything on your computer hands-free.

The current Mac operating system has a fairly robust dictation program built-in. **Hit the function (fn) key twice to activate the dictation function.** Then hit return when you're done speaking. This function is only good for 60 seconds of speech. To turn on extended dictation, go to System Preferences, choose Dictation and Speech, and then click the Enhanced Dictation box. Enhanced dictation still has some bugs (wonky punctuation).

DISABLE INTERNET

Strict Workflow. Blocks access to web pages you designate for 25 minutes at a time.

ORGANIZATION

Kanbanflow. Lets you create columns that you can use to track different projects or tasks. Can set deadlines, reminders, and a Pomodoro timer (25 minute work increments).

Trello. Similar to Kanbanflow

Wunderlist. Lets you make and share lists from any device

Evernote. Allows you to take verbal or written notes, clip urls, and more. Synchs between devices.

EMAIL MANAGEMENT Emailing reminders, check-ins, and deadlines to yourself is an incredibly powerful way to keep yourself on track.

Streak (integrates with Gmail. Schedule emails, create "snippets of text," see who has opened your email).



Follow-up-then: Free email reminder/scheduler (plugin for Gmail)
Boomerang: Free email reminder/scheduler (plugin for Gmail)
Sidekick: Free email tracker- tracks when an email is opened (plugin for Gmail)

GOOGLE

Google for Dyslexia: Chrome Extensions
Google for Dyslexia: Chrome Add-Ons
Google for Dyslexia: Chrome Apps

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

GREAT BLOGS

- Academic Mental Health Collective
- Chronically Academic
- Blog by Dr. Nadine Muller on Academia and Mental Health

SUPPORT ON TWITTER

#MHPHDchat
#academicselfcare
#phdchat
@chron_ac
#mentalhealth

ARTICLES ON MENTAL HEALTH IN ACADEMIA

Student Experience Survey 2017: Investigating Well-Being at University
[Research by a doctoral student at University of Manchester]

This is Your Mind on Grad School

Why Schizophrenia Need not Rob us of a Life in Academia

Dark Thoughts: Why Mental Illness is on the Rise in Academia

Paying Graduate School's Mental Toll

On Depression, and the Toll Academia Exacts

The Ivy League, Mental Illness, and the Meaning of Life

Mental Health Issues Among Graduate Students

There is a Culture of Acceptance Around Mental Health Issues in Academia

Universities Urged to Tackle Mental Health Crisis

[A Beautiful Mind](#) [on schizophrenia]

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ANXIETY

A Hotel Room of One's Own: Notes From an Anxious Traveler
Living with Anxiety as a Student Affairs Professional
How Anxiety Scrambles Your Brain and Makes it Hard to Learn
Managing an Anxiety Disorder in Academia is a Full Time Job
Life as an Anxious Scientist

BIPOLAR

Being Open in Academia: A Personal Narrative of Mental Illness and Disclosure
<https://conditionallyaccepted.com/2015/07/21/bipolar-comingout/>
Managing Your Mental Health in Academia (focus on bipolar disorder)
[Upwards, Downwards, & Onwards: Being Bi-Polar in Academia](#)

IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Learning to Deal With the Impostor Syndrome

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