

Reducing Over-Complexity in Your Scholarly Writing

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Does your writing stall out because you get overwhelmed and confused?

In my never-understanding quest to understand the brain of the academic, I have finally realized something: it is incredibly complex. In the academic brain, thousands of ideas swirl around, each one reconnecting back to earlier ideas or spawning a new question, thought or idea. This is a sure sign of intelligence, you'll be happy to know. On the other hand, this complexity, if not kept under control, can stop you from functioning at an optimal level. Eventually, it can lead you to feel that you have no high-level thoughts at all.

Over-complexity can be a real problem if you want to make progress on the important writing projects that really matter to your life and your career, but which don't come with external deadlines breathing down your neck. Like, say, your dissertation, or that book you really need to finish writing. The complexity of your mind can overwhelm you as you write, causing you to give up on your project because it all seems too muddled. The lack of deadline allows you to set it aside "temporarily," in the magical hope that the unclear mess that you have created will clear up on its own.

Here are some methods of approaching your writing that will help to rein in the chaos:

- * Write to find out what you think. Your thoughts will be somewhat muddled until you get them in writing. Don't go around and around in circles internally until you know what to write. Write before you know what you're going to say.

- * Learn to tolerate some degree of confusion, and yes, complexity in your early writing. I've noticed that many academics get panicky when their first draft is a mess. It's supposed to be a mess! Have faith in the revision process. Whether it's the paragraph you're struggling with today, or the chapter you completed last week, there are ways of simplifying and clarifying your work later on.

- * Let go of the idea that you can create complex arguments in one draft. One-draft writing worked when you were an undergraduate, or maybe even in some grad school courses, as Howard Becker points out in *Writing for Social Scientists*. But it just doesn't work for dissertators or professors. The most prolific, experienced professors know that it takes many drafts before you reach clarity in your thinking or your writing.

- * If you have created a draft with lots of questions and notes to yourself, along with alternative possibilities and other additions that may be unnecessary, cut and paste these extras into another document, so that you can see your own clean draft. You're not throwing away your thoughts, just corralling them into a holding pen.

By the way, I practice what I preach. This simple article, which contains about 935 words, originally had 1451. So I threw out 516 words. Sob.

* As you write, notice when you're feeling stuck because you have to make a decision. Writing consists of a series of small decisions; e.g. "Should I state that point here?" "Is this enough support for what I'm going to say?" "Do I need to include this citation?" At some point, you're going to have to decide one way or another. Go ahead and flip a coin. It will either become clear to you later what you need to do, or you will get feedback from others that tells you whether you made the right choice. Don't let those small decisions paralyze you.

* Once you've made your decisions, you don't need to throw out the ideas that you have put into the holding pen. Start a file called "Ideas," into which you can put those thoughts and ideas. You'll be thankful to have this file at some later date, when you are scounging around for a starting point for a new article.

If you are a grad student in the humanities, a similar file could be called "For the Book." This type of file has been popular with some dissertators in my coaching groups, who agonize over letting go of great ideas or lovely writing that just won't fit into the dissertation. Those ideas could well be the beginning of a great chapter for that book you will create from your dissertation.

* Practice revising. How?

* By mind mapping what you have already written, if the organization of your writing seems unclear. You can do this by writing your main argument and the topic sentences of your most important paragraphs on stickies or index cards. Place the argument in the center, then move the stickies around, or remove them, until it all seems clearer.

* By creating drafts, rereading them and fixing them. Always focus on clarity. You will get better at this with practice.

* By giving rough drafts to readers and making changes that they suggest, and rewriting parts that they misunderstand (if your initial readers misunderstand, chances are later readers will, too.)

* Focus on simplifying. Remove redundancies, make fancy flowery sentences clearer, and take out anything that doesn't move the main argument forward.

* Check whether you're using the "complexity defense." Ask yourself whether you're making your writing more complicated than it needs to be so that you'll never have to finish it. This could be a way of avoiding the inevitable criticism that any piece of scholarly writing must face.

These are starting points for those of you who are either overwhelmed with the complexity of your thoughts, or afraid that you don't have any thoughts worth writing down. Scholarly writing is never an easy process, but you can make it a little easier on yourself by implementing one idea this week.