

Tracking research

By Abigail Winter and Susan Gasson

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I began 2016, as so many previous years, with the intention of becoming more productive. As a bibliophile since the age of about 4 years old, my first place to go was therefore the university library – a haven of wonderful ideas in print form. And, quite literally, a gold mine of brilliance in this case. I found Paul Silvia's [How to write a lot](#), and devoured it in less than 24 hours, then bought a copy for myself. And it prompted the scheduler that Susan Gasson kindly presented at this year's [Doctoral Writing SIG meeting](#).

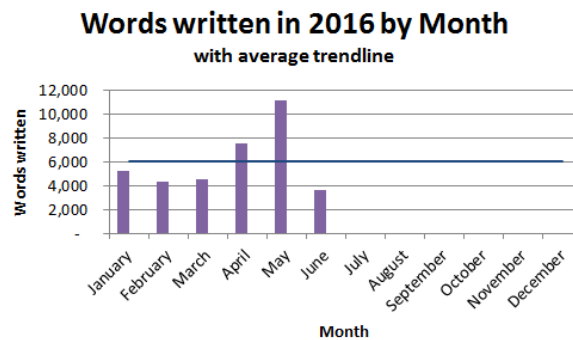
In an almost throw-away fashion, Silvia mentions that he uses a simple database to track his writing each day, as one of his strategies for writing a lot. I took the idea and started by tracking my reading (because that was all I had done for the first fortnight of the year – no writing at that point). I also added a writing tracker, because that had been the point that Silvia made – echoing the old cliché, attributed alternatively to William Thomson, 1st Baron Kelvin or to the 15th century Austrian mathematician Rheticus, that “what gets measured gets done”. And it has certainly proved true in this instance – in the first six months of 2016, I read 281 articles or academic books, and wrote 36,477 words towards articles, submissions, applications and reviews.

Because I use Microsoft Excel every day for work, I chose to use Excel to store my tracking data. I therefore have one tab to track my reading, and another to track my writing. (A third tab tracks the projects I'm working on this year, and the final two tabs in the spreadsheet have my own tracking and reporting tables, calculations, and graphs.)

DATE DAY	WORDS GOAL	OUTCOME	PROJECT	Starting WC	Ending WC	Running total - Month	Running total - Year
15 Friday	460 200 words	Met	Crisis in Journalism	499	959	460	460
16 Saturday	164 100 words	Met	Response to Hammersley	1808	1972	624	624
17 Sunday	937 800 words	Met	Mobility case study for Killick's book	0	937	1561	1561
17 Sunday	332 200 words	Met	Response to Hammersley	1972	2304	1433	1433
22 Friday	0 Data - national Journalism to 2014	Met	Crisis In Journalism			1893	1893
23 Saturday	1876 Type up prior writing	Met	Butterfly effect	2202	4078	3769	3769
24 Sunday	634 Finish first draft	Met	Butterfly effect	4078	4712	4403	4403
29 Friday	0 Data - national all to 2014	Met	Crisis in Journalism			4403	4403
30 Saturday	259 200 words	Met	Changing expectations	204	463	4662	4662
31 Sunday	594 200 words	Met	Response to Hammersley	2304	2898	5256	5256

The writing that I'm tracking is what might be called a first draft – I'm an old-fashioned girl, so I still take my notes in longhand (pencil on paper), so what is tracked in the spreadsheet is the conversion of those hand-written words into text in a computer. Usually it's identical, but sometimes I edit as I type – in the flow of the moment, as it were.

Once it's set up (and the template is already available [here](#)), then all you have to do is a little simple typing and Excel does all of the hard work for you. Because I use Excel every day for work, I use its inbuilt calculations and graphing tools to tell all sorts of interesting things about my habits as an independent scholar. Of course, having the data on what I've read and written in Excel means that I can do a lot more analysis than just what I've shown you here, but that's a piece of writing for another day.



In many ways the spreadsheet behaves like a diary. In the project sheet it records events underway, completed and proposed, and provides a way of monitoring progress on these. For the user it also provides a useful way of reviewing workload and considering new projects and time management. In the readings section it allows flexibility in terms of what and how information is captured. Depending on the need it can be a reference for citations, or a point of reference for searching for readings against chosen criteria. As a glance it is possible to see the range of readings you've considered and the amount of reading completed. Which are your reading days and which aren't? Have you maintained momentum or not? Are you pushing yourself too hard or not hard enough? The writing section, if entries are maintained, provides a similar reference point and an aid to planning your time – which days do you write more? Is there a pattern there that can help you become more productive? Which days will be data analysis and which will be write-up?

Month	Read	Written
January	44	5,256
February	38	4,366
March	42	4,531
April	56	7,544
May	39	11,145
June	62	3,635
July		
August		
September		
October		
November		
December		
TOTAL	281	36,477
Average	46.83333	6,080

A little note of warning with such tools is to ensure they are sufficiently simple and useful that you continue to enter details into them. If they aren't kept current, their value diminishes dramatically. Also be careful not to mistake time spent formatting and refining the spreadsheet with doing actual reading, writing and research. It is just a tool to aid monitoring and reporting – it isn't actually going to deliver the research outcomes if that is all you do. However, tools like the spreadsheet can be a very useful part of a routine to settle into doing work, to keep a track of work under way, or to wrap up a day or week of work.

The greatest beauty of the tracking spreadsheet is its flexibility – you can make it as simple or as complex as you like. You can use it for everything you’re working on, or just for one thing. Or, if it doesn’t work for you, then you can leave it behind and try something else entirely.

Works Cited

Silvia, Paul (2007) *How to write a lot: A practical guide to productive academic writing*. American Psychological Association, Washington DC.

Further Reading

Bolker, Joan (1998). *Writing your dissertation in 15 minutes a day*. Henry Holt, New York.

Rick Reis “Tomorrow’s Professor” <<https://mailman.stanford.edu/mailman/listinfo/tomorrows-professor>>

Kerry Ann Rockquemore “Monday Motivator” <<http://www.facultydiversity.org>>