CHAPTER 1

How We Get Started Writing

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Writers write.
—Ronald J. Pelias (2019, p. 150)

This book is about writing qualitative research. Let's not worry about the qualitative part yet. We'll get to that in subsequent chapters. For now, let's start with the more general basics of writing.

Although some students and researchers love writing, many fear it. After all, what's more intimidating than staring at a blank page? Rest assured, whether you come to the task of writing with great enthusiasm, deep dread, or somewhere in between, you can learn to write. Furthermore, you can learn to write well. You've got this.

For starters, you write all the time. To have made it through your education, from elementary school on, you learned to write. You learned to write effectively, too. For example, in high school you learned how to structure an essay to get a passing grade. Your experience with writing extends far beyond learning to leap over formal hurdles. In daily life, you may write grocery lists, to-do lists, emails, text messages, social media posts, special occasion cards, and much more. Before we even get into what we've learned during higher education and doing research, you've got loads of writing experience. The problem is that you don't value it. You don't even think about those tasks as writing. Each possibility I listed is in fact writing. Moreover, writing these things well matters and can affect your life in important ways. Take the humble grocery list. Let's say I send my partner to the store with one of the following lists, with the secret hope of making shepherd's pie (see Table 1.1).

List A is much better than List B. Why? Because it is more specific—and

TABLE 1.1. Grocery Lists

List A	List B
2 pounds ground beef	2 pounds beef
Frozen peas	Peas
1 bag russet potatoes	Potatoes
1 box beef broth	Broth
Worcestershire sauce	That brown sauce

specificity is a hallmark of good writing. With List B in hand, my poor partner could end up buying steak and barbecue sauce, among other errors. That certainly changes dinner. List A better communicates my intention, and therefore my partner is more likely to understand it. Writing is simply a way of communicating through written language. We do it all the time.

Now imagine some of the other daily writing examples I mentioned. What happens if you send an unintelligible email to your professor or employer? What about a vague or cryptic text message to someone you're dating? What about a poorly worded social media post about a controversial topic? In all of these instances, we do our best to write clearly, because there are immediate consequences for not doing so. Most of the time, you probably don't even think about any of this. You don't need to think about it because you already have basic writing skills, and you understand the importance of communicating effectively.

If someone asked you whether you wrote today, unless you had a school or work project, you'd probably say that you have not written, even though, as just discussed, you may have written quite a bit. This bears striking similarities to how we think about writing qualitatively. We often think about writing as a totally distinct phase of qualitative research and thus something we don't yet have experience with. However, if you're at the point at which you've generated and analyzed qualitative data, then you've already been writing a lot. You may have already written many of the following: a research proposal, an institutional review board application, a literature review, recruitment letters, informed consent documents, research instruments (e.g., an interview guide), field notes, memo notes, jottings, interpretation and analysis notes, and many other things. Qualitative researchers write all the time, converting research experiences into language so that we, and others, may access them later (Weaver-Hightower, 2019). By writing everything down as it's occurring, as well as our reflections after the fact, we transform a lived research experience into an "account"

of research (Geertz, 1973, p. 19). So by the time you're ready to enter the phase of writing up your research, you've amassed considerable experience writing—from schoolwork throughout the years, from daily life, and from research design and data generation. Now it's time to hone your skills by developing a writing discipline.

Quick Writing Activity

Here's a hypothetical situation: Mary is going to miss the deadline to submit her final sociology paper because she has the flu. She needs to notify Professor Brown. As the assignment is necessary for completion of the course, she wants to make sure to communicate politely, clearly, and effectively, including offering possibilities for course completion. Spend 5–10 minutes writing an effective email from Mary to her professor.

We all have to email professors, colleagues, or publishers. So you needn't be an undergraduate student to benefit from the preceding email activity. Let's consider a more advanced exercise that researchers at all levels are likely to encounter—and one that my experience as an editor shows me we can all benefit from practicing.

Quick Writing Activity

You see an open call to submit a chapter for an edited book. The topic of the book aligns well with your research. At this initial stage, the editor has requested a brief email stating your interest. You must include (1) a brief paragraph on your proposed chapter (topic, research, relevance to the book's scope) and (2) a brief paragraph about you (your education, research background, and qualifications to write the chapter). Spend 15 minutes drafting this email. Revise the email at least twice.

Creating a Writing Discipline

The prospect of formal writing is intimidating to many students and researchers. Writing for publication may seem like too big a task, and it's one that some feel ill prepared for. The problem in part stems from cultural ideas that espouse that "talented" writers receive lightning bolts of inspiration that the rest of us aren't privy to. Magic is needed to produce great writing. I'd love to tell you this isn't true, that there's some formula you can follow and presto, you'll be a great writer, no magic needed. The truth is that inspiration and magic are very much a part of the writing process.

However, they are available to us all. Writing isn't a skill one is born with; it's something any of us can learn to do well. H. L. Goodall, Jr. (2008), explained this as follows: "Writing is a skill before it becomes a craft or an art. As is true with any other skill, it requires regular disciplined practice. As with any other skill set that you want to be good at, you'll get better at it *faster* if you practice every day" (p. 60).

The best writers don't sit around waiting for some kind of divine inspiration. They plod away, word by word, line by line. When things start to come together and inspiration strikes, it's the result of this rigorous practice. **Writing is a craft** that must be learned and practiced. This is how we develop skills and talent.

Many days will be spent plodding away, forcing yourself to do the work, even when it isn't particularly fun. But there's magic, too. It can't be planned. The reason is that writing is a process of discovery and creation. How does magic come to us? Discipline brings it on and allows us to take full advantage of it when the moment presents itself. By learning the tools of our craft, honing our writing skills through rigorous practice, and even forcing ourselves to write when it's hard, understanding that we can edit later, when the magical bits happen, we're ready. Sometimes writing really is hard work, and we just go word by word, line by line. Other times we're so swept up we may forget to eat lunch. It's coming together, and we're going with it. Both the discipline and the magic it will bring are available to us all—to you just as they are to me. The key is practicing, developing a writing routine, and plodding away. The more we do this, even when it's like pulling teeth, the better we become, and the more chances there are for the thoughts and words to begin flowing, you know, like magic.

Three things are need in order to develop a writing discipline: time, space, and something to get you started.

Time and Space

Writing doesn't just happen. We need to make time for it, prioritize it. **Create a writing schedule.** Set specific blocks of time designated for writing each week. As with anything else in life, whether it's exercising or time spent at our jobs, if we want to develop a discipline, we need to carve out time. A problem some researchers face is not maintaining their writing time. If you were taking a class on certain days at certain times, you would show up. If you were scheduled to work at your job on certain days at certain times, you would show up. As a qualitative researcher, writing is a part of your job. You may not have a professor or employer to hold you accountable, so you need to learn to do this for yourself. Write down

your writing schedule and stick to it. Protect your writing time. Consider it sacred.

Setting up a writing space with all the materials you need for your project will save you time and allow you to more easily slip in and out of writing. It also aids in organization. Given the vast amounts of data and literature qualitative researchers are often working with, keeping things organized is paramount. Leave all the materials you need for your project neatly arranged wherever you work—a desk, a table, an office. Keep your computer files organized and accessible. For example, when working on a new project, you may have one folder for the project right on your desktop so you can easily access your documents. If you work primarily outside your home or office (e.g., at the library, at a coffee shop), then have your work bag ready to go at all times, organized with what you need for your project. Make it easy for yourself to start working and to maximize writing time. As you create your workspace, consider other things you might need as well. For example, Harry Wolcott (2009) even suggested keeping snacks nearby. First, you might get hungry. Second, if your snacks are already where you are working, you'll have no excuse to waste time getting something.

Bear in mind that time and space aren't just about hours passing and a physical location—they're also about bracketing off everything else and mentally giving yourself time and space to concentrate only on writing. Put your smartphone away, don't open social media tabs, close your email. It's easy to become distracted or to continually stop to scroll away online. Developing an effective writing discipline means that we write without distraction, and we write when it's difficult. Be fully present and committed. In order to open yourself up to true inspiration and, yes, magic, you need to first do the work. When you set aside your writing time, schedule in breaks. For example, maybe you write for 45–50 minutes and then take a 10-minute break. But during the actual writing time, eliminate all other distractions. For real.

Writing Prompts

You've set aside time to write, but you don't know how to start. Try a writing prompt. Simon Kewin (2010) explains: "A writing prompt is simply a topic around which you start jotting down ideas. The prompt could be a single word, a short phrase, a complete paragraph or even a picture, with the idea being to give you something to focus upon as you write. You may stick very closely to the original prompt, or you may wander off on a tangent." Writing prompts are commonly used by commercial authors to exercise the writer's muscle. Academic researchers are rarely taught

to use writing prompts; however, they can be quite useful for novice and experienced writers alike. There are three primary reasons for qualitative researchers to work with prompts: (1) sparking creativity, (2) learning to use literary tools, and (3) discipline/practice.

Writing prompts are tools to jump-start your writing and do not typically result in a part of your final project. Prompts may be based on your research topic, but they need not be and often are not. The idea is to get comfortable writing, to learn to be creative, and to develop a habit.

If you want to stay away from your research topic for the time being, just to have a way of practicing writing, you can use any of the following sources to develop a writing prompt: a headline from a newspaper or magazine; the opening sentence of a book or story; a post from social media; a photograph or image from a magazine or online source; or an object in your home, office, or somewhere else. Here are examples of how to use the prompts:

- Take a headline from a newspaper or magazine and use it as the title of an essay. Just start writing.
- Use the opening sentence of a book or story and keep writing your own story.
- Use a post from social media as a title for an op-ed and start writing.
- Take a photograph or an image from a magazine or online source and describe it in detail.
- Take an object in your home, office, or somewhere else and describe it in detail so that someone who isn't present can envision it. As an alternative, create a story about where the object came from, who uses it, and why.

If you want to use a prompt that directly relates to your research topic, Sandra Faulkner (2019) suggests using an interview transcript, literature review source, or photo from field research. You can also simply take your general topic and develop opening sentences related to it.

For example, if your topic is *body image,* your prompts might be:

- The mirror was her enemy.
- He had wanted to be bigger since high school.
- They went to the bathroom together every day after lunch.
- The images in the magazines mocked them.
- No matter what she did, her hair would never look like the models she so admired.

Or, for another example, if your topic is *domestic violence,* your prompts might be:

- He was in a rage again.
- She cowered in the corner.
- She quickly threw their clothes into a garbage bag.
- They didn't believe her when she reported it.
- The shelter couldn't accommodate children.

Or, for a final example, if your topic is *elementary school education,* your prompts might be:

- The kids complain about group projects.
- She felt sick to her stomach when the teacher called on her.
- He followed the school district's third-grade lesson plan despite reservations.
- She prepared a social studies module drawing on current events.
- He was sent to the principal again for bullying a classmate.

Whether you're using prompts unrelated to your research or directly related to it, the idea is to free write, without censoring yourself. Just write. There's no "good" or "bad" writing when responding to a prompt. There simply is writing or there isn't. Just write.

Quick Writing Activity

Generate a writing prompt on the topic of your research, or any topic, using one of the strategies reviewed. Use the prompt as your jumping-off point and free write for 10 minutes.

The Phases of Writing

People don't just sit at their computers and magically produce an article or book. There are phases to the writing process: mulling, outlining, drafting, revising, seeking feedback, and more revising. Figure 1.1 illustrates this process.

In practice, there will be many more rounds of revising. To end up with

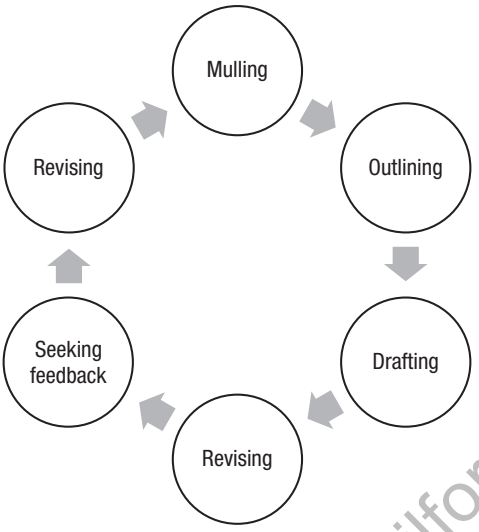

FIGURE 1.1. The phases of writing.

a polished piece of writing, we revise many times, sometimes dozens of times. Furthermore, mulling—or stewing on our ideas—is something that occurs throughout the process (see Figure 1.2).

Let's look in more detail at what occurs during each of the phases of writing.

Mulling

Mulling is the process of stewing on ideas, mentally batting around alternatives, and conceptualizing your final write-up. It is *purposeful thinking*. Think about your data, think about how to organize and present the data, think about your findings and what it all means, think about how to put the pieces together for someone reading it. Although it may seem like this part of the writing process doesn't get you anywhere, nothing could be further from the truth. Thinking about your research and how to write it up is necessary and productive. This time allows you to start to see how pieces of the puzzle might fit together, how they might be arranged, what they mean, and how best to communicate that meaning. Sholem Asch said, "Writing comes more easily if you have something to say" (as quoted in Wolcott, 2009, p. 9). The more you mentally immerse yourself in your research, the more you will develop ideas, and thus the more you will have to say. This process will ready you for developing an outline. However, as indicated

in Figure 1.2, this is not simply an isolated phase of writing. Rather, it is a part of the process you will return to time and again. In fact, the more writing you do and feedback you solicit, the more it will spark ideas, which you will stew on.

Outlining

You've mulled over your data. Now it's time to write an outline. An outline organizes your thoughts and becomes the plan for your write-up. An outline is a sequential list of the topics you plan to cover. The more detailed the outline, the easier the writing process. Investing time in this part of the process pays dividends down the line. The nature of your outline depends on what you are writing—the form of your representation. Is it a journal article? A monograph? A literary work? An op-ed or blog? These different forms are explored at length in later chapters; however, for now I briefly review what an outline might include, depending on the form of the

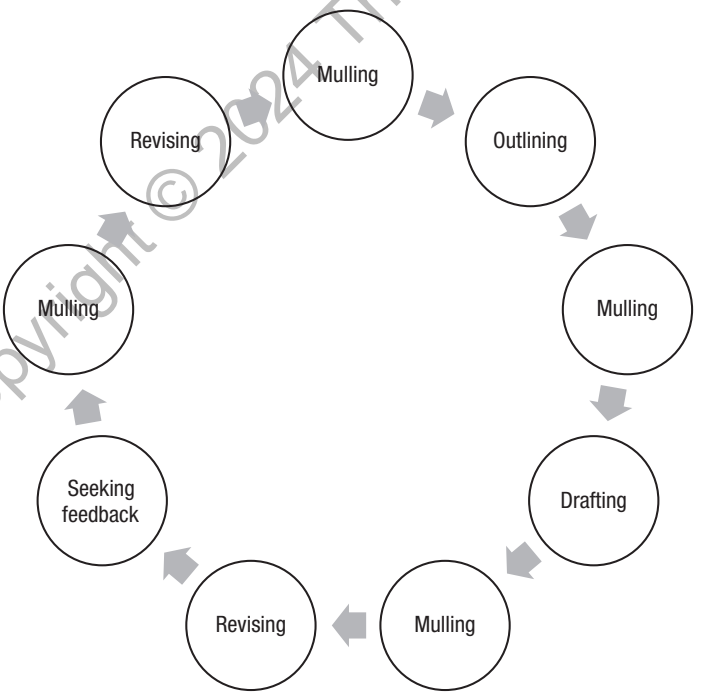

FIGURE 1.2. The phases of writing in practice.

writing. Remember, in each instance the outline should be sequential, that is, organized in the order in which it will be written.

- *Journal article:* A list of each section in the article that includes the main assertions that will be made, examples of data that will be featured, and literature sources that will be referred to.
- *Monograph:* A detailed table of contents that includes the topic of each chapter and the main assertions that will be made, examples of data that will be featured, and literature sources that will be referred to.
- *Literary work:* A detailed plot and storyline that includes what will happen at each major plot point and a list of the specific scenes that will get you from one plot point to the next.
- *Blog or op-ed:* A list of the main point covered in each paragraph that includes any references to the data, quotes, or other sources that will be featured.

Although it is true that the more effort you put into the outline, the more payoff you will get from it, also bear in mind that it's not a static document. Rather, think of it as a "*living* document" (Weaver-Hightower, 2019, p. 20). Don't be bound by the outline. It's a tool, not a prison. As you move from the outline to writing and later rewriting, you will undoubtedly find that some parts of your plan work better than others. You may need to reorganize the order of topics to best crystallize the information and any arguments being presented. You may also need to add or eliminate topics or other specific ideas. In Chapter 6 I share the original proposal for this book. You'll see that the table of contents differs from what you are now reading. I revised it many times while writing this book and learning what did and did not work well.

Drafting

Now it's time to write your first draft. When it comes to writing, there's a lot of advice out there, some of which is in this book; but there's only one hard and fast rule: write. Just write. You can edit later and will do so many times. Author Anne Lamott (1995) urges you to remember that everyone writes bad first drafts. Everyone. What's important is getting your ideas down on the page. Remember, you've already gotten this far. You designed a study, carried out the research, analyzed the data, and came up with a plan to write up your findings. Each of those phases involved writing. Now,

you're exclusively writing. Ronald Pelias (2019) eloquently says, "Writers write. It's what they do. They do they work of putting words on the page" (p. 150). Now you're a writer.

Where to start? Lamott (1995) suggests that if we think about an entire piece, we may feel overwhelmed and end up staring at a blank page or screen. She advises breaking down the story we wish to tell. In other words, it's helpful to work in manageable bits. This is where your outline will come in handy. Work on one section at a time. You do not need to write in order. In fact, when writing an article or book, it's usually best to save the introduction for last. Did you ever notice how a well-written journal article or book flows seamlessly—the introduction perfectly setting up everything that follows? Well, chances are it's because the author wrote the beginning last. You can start anywhere. Some researchers may find it useful to begin with the methodology section. As the research has already occurred, the methodology is pretty straightforward to report. Other researchers may find it useful to start somewhere in the middle, in the discussion of the data. It's likely you have a lot to say about the data—illustrations of the data, what you learned, and what it means. Writing is easier when you have a lot you want to communicate. Again, you can start from anywhere; these are just examples.

When you're writing in a literary format, such as a short story, novel, or play, you can begin with any scene (and remember, scenes were broken down in your storyline). Again, you can write these out of order. I've written novels beginning with the last scene and others beginning with the first. If you're stuck, you may want to start with the scene in which either (1) your two main characters meet each other or (2) the two main characters appear together. This will help you get into the mindset of the central characters, flesh them out, and "hear" their voices.

Drafting and rewriting are at the heart of this book. In this chapter, I'm merely laying out the phases of writing. However, *how* we draft, which translates to *how* we write, depends on many factors—the format in which we're writing, the kinds of data we're using, our approach to storytelling, our use of different theoretical lenses and literature, and how we draw on the primary tools of writing to develop our own style. All these elements of writing are reviewed in subsequent chapters.

Revising, Seeking Feedback, Revising

Once you've completed a full draft, it's time to engage in cycles of revisions and feedback seeking. I suggest at least one or two rounds of your own revisions before soliciting the input of others. That way, you'll have

a more coherent work when you seek feedback, allowing readers to focus on more fully formed ideas with probably far fewer typos and other minor distractions that are bound to be prevalent in the first draft. For qualitative researchers, rewriting is an act of analysis and interpretation. As you write, new meanings may emerge—links you didn't expect, themes you underestimated, connections you failed to see. Writing is thus a critical time for strengthening our ideas. Be ruthless when you revise. Use red pen on every unnecessary word. Be specific with your language. Look for and weed out repetition. Use repetition purposefully. Reorganize the order, playing with what you have until you're satisfied. Look for spaces to elaborate and spaces to pare down. Define jargon. Any academic (or other) term that readers may not be familiar with or that you're using in a specific way should be defined the first time it appears. I suggest going through your first draft and highlighting all key terms, concepts, and theories. Then make sure they are clearly defined.

Finally, pay attention to sentence structures, aiming to vary not just what you say but *how* you say it. Construct different types of sentences. Consider the length of sentences and the placement of longer and shorter sentences in relation to each other. Short sentences are powerful. They punctuate ideas. Vary your use of punctuation. For instance, commas change pacing (Weaver-Hightower, 2019).

Remember, revising is about both *what* you're saying and *how* you're saying it. Revising helps you put your best foot forward. Good writing allows your ideas to shine.

Let's look at an example of what revision looks like. In the box on pages 15–16 is a scene from my novel *Hollyland*. The novel has undertones of my two-decades-long research into the arts, and specifically arts-based research. In the following scene, arts researcher Dee Schwartz is out to dinner with her new boyfriend, Hollywood star Ryder Field. Ryder and several movie star colleagues and their spouses are at a restaurant for a meeting with British director Oliver Spence, whom they are trying to woo to direct their next film. This scene had been revised more than a dozen times before the following version. I share this final revision to illustrate how much can still be strengthened, even after many rounds of rewriting (inserts are shown in bold, deletions with strikethrough). Just imagine how much red ink there was on the first draft!

With respect to seeking feedback, how do we go about this? What kind of feedback is useful? Depending on the nature of your project, you may solicit feedback from professors/mentors, peers (fellow students or colleagues), and your research participants. You do not need to ask all these people, so you'll need to make choices based on your project. I also suggest

Hollyland Sample Revision

"Hello, hello, sorry I'm late. The LA traffic never ceases," Oliver said, as he shook ~~everyone's~~ hands **and greeted each member of the group**. "My wife sends regrets. Our youngest wasn't feeling well so she decided to stay home." He then turned his attention to Dee. "You look familiar, but I don't believe we've had the pleasure."

"This is my girlfriend, Dee Schwartz," Rye said.

Dee looked at him, a little surprised. "**Good evening,** ~~Hi,~~ it's nice to meet you," she said to Oliver, extending her hand.

"Likewise. Hmm. You do look awfully familiar," he **repeated** ~~said~~, studying her face.

"Oliver, what can we get you to drink?" Grey asked.

"Gin and tonic with a piece of lime."

Grey signaled the bartender who promptly served the cocktail. After making small talk for a few minutes, Grey **cut to the chase** ~~said~~, "So Oliver, what did you think of the script?"

"It's compelling. Meaty roles for **each** ~~all~~ of you," he replied.

"We fell in love with it," Billy said.

"It's the perfect mix of drama and heart," Rye added.

"You Americans don't waste any time," Oliver said with a laugh. "Straight away to business."

"It is rather boorish of them, **isn't it?**" Sloane said, with an effortlessly charming expression on her face.

They all smiled and chuckled.

Grey jumped back in. "The financing is in place, we're all producing and starring in it, **and** the studio is **one** hundred percent behind this for major distribution. You know **that** the right director can make or break a film. We want you. You're our guy. What will it take?"

"I'm interested, obviously it's tempting, but I'm quite careful about **which** ~~what~~ projects to tackle these days. I . . . " he trailed off, staring at Dee. "I'm sorry, **forgive my staring.** I'm just desperately trying to place you. Do you work in the industry?"

"Me**?**~~,~~ **No**~~no~~. I'm an arts researcher, and a writer."

He looked at her quizzically for a moment, **and then a flash of recognition swept across his face** ~~before saying~~, "Dee Schwartz. Wait, you're not *Deanna Schwartz*? *Dr. Deanna Schwartz*?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Holy shit," he said, his eyes popping out of his head. "This is an

honor, truly. I'm speechless. I've never met an actual legend before." Dee looked down, as if searching for a way to respond while the famous **movie** stars looked on, utterly confused. "You're absolutely brilliant, a genius," Oliver continued.

"I assure you, I'm not."

"You most certainly are. I'm in awe of your work. I have so many questions to ask you. I could talk to you all night."

Rye looked at her curiously and squeezed her hand.

Oliver turned to the group. "Well, **isn't this an** ~~this is a real~~ unexpected treat**?**~~.~~ Here I thought it was just going to be another night of Hollywood schmoozing. Shall we head to the table to chat?"

"Uh, sure," Grey stuttered, looking **blankly** at Billy and Rye, and then at Dee.

"Splendid. Dee, I have so much to discuss with you," Oliver said. Rye motioned for Oliver and Dee to s~~tep ahead of the group~~ **lead the way**.

Grey looked at his friends inquisitively, furrowing his brow, and he and Sloane headed to the table.

Billy **whispered** ~~quietly said~~ to Rye, "Seymour Peretz? Oliver Spence? Who the hell is this girl?"

He **chuckled**~~ shook his head~~. "She's the girl who stole my heart."

joining or creating a writing group or finding a writing buddy with whom to share your work. Writing groups and buddies work well when there is an atmosphere of noncompetition and everyone is committed to helping one another best achieve their vision. Sometimes it takes a while to find the right fit, much like finding a romantic partner or therapist. It's also important to set expectations from the beginning. Be clear about what kind of atmosphere you are all trying to create and what each person's commitment is with respect to sharing work and offering feedback. Go over examples of the kinds of feedback that are helpful (e.g., specific things that worked well or did not work well, rather than just saying "I loved it" or "I didn't understand it"). Once you've solicited ample feedback and you're done revising, it's time to get a professional copyeditor. Some publishers will provide copyediting, so check in advance, whether it's a journal, book publisher, or newspaper. The best copyeditors do more than "fix" grammar and the like—they point out things that are or are not working well,

they make note of tonal issues, and they offer alternatives to trouble spots. When you're sharing your work with those you trust, take in their comments with gratitude and without defensiveness, consider them carefully, stew on them, try out their suggestions. In the end, you'll need to sort through the feedback you get, to accept those suggestions you find helpful, and to let go of others. Although input is important, you don't want to get mired down with too many different ideas, either.

Writing Tricks: Busting the Myth of Writer's Block

No one expects you to sit in front of a blank computer screen and have your thesis, article, or book magically unfurl itself before you. As much as popular culture at times presents writing that way, as reviewed in this chapter, it's a process with distinct phases. Take one thing at a time.

Don't buy into the idea that writing is "too hard" or you're "not good at it." The skills needed to write, and to write well, are available to everyone, to you just as they are to me. One of the reasons so many researchers struggle with the task of writing is that they've bought into the notion of so-called writer's block and fear staring at blank pages, at a loss for how to proceed. Writer's block is a myth. I'll say it again: Writer's block is a myth. Sure, there will be times that you don't feel inspired and that you feel unable to write what you desire. But you can always write *something*. Often the process is word by word. You must commit to doing the work—the daily grind of writing, even when it's hard, even when it's not going well. Remember, you can't edit a blank page. Here are some tricks for those times when you're struggling.

- **Try using voice-activated software (e.g., Dragon).** We speak differently than we write, usually quicker, and it's less intimidating. This can be a good strategy for talking out your ideas, coming up with examples, and getting a lot of words down on the page. Remember, you can always edit later. If you've never used voice-activated software before, bear in mind that when you begin, there may be a lot of errors. However, once the program acclimates to your voice and speech patterns, the errors will be greatly reduced, and the program will even become familiar with discipline-specific jargon you may use. So don't allow frustration over typos to derail you. Stick with it. Use your real voice at a normal speaking volume. You want to train the software to be effective. Also, learn the command instructions for indentations, paragraphs, and the like. Again, in the long run, you'll avoid

more errors if you invest some time up front. This can be an effective tool that greatly reduces the time spent writing.

■ **Go somewhere else to write.** If your dorm, home, or office is too isolated and simply isn't working, change your environment. Go to a coffee shop, the library, or the computer center at your school. Sometimes the combination of a change of scenery and being around other people will give you new energy.

■ **Get a writing buddy or join a writing group.** Sometimes writing is like exercising: We're not motivated enough to do it on our own, but if we've made plans to go for a run with a friend, we show up. Success in writing is ultimately about showing up. Use whatever strategies work for you to create accountability or to motivate you. When in-person meetings aren't possible, meet your writing buddy or group over Zoom or the like. You can use breakout rooms to create a "coffee house" vibe.

■ **Try collaborative writing.** For some, writing alone may be a challenge. Make your project collaborative and work with one or more coauthors. Assign one another parts of the project to work on, create deadlines, inspire each other, and hold one another accountable.

■ **Switch tasks.** If you've tried working on whatever your goal is for a specific writing block and you just can't make any headway, put it aside and work on another part of your project. For example, go back and edit what you've already written, skip ahead and try working on writing a different section of your project, or just write down notes with your ideas. Even when you can't seem to write what you'd most like to write, you can always work on something. Keep moving it forward.

■ **Take a break.** Sometimes a short break or change of scenery is needed. Take a walk in your neighborhood, go for a short bike ride, or listen to some music. Don't abandon writing; simply take 10–30 minutes to clear your head, then get back to it.

Dos and Don'ts: When You're Stuck

✓ Do try a new strategy.

✓ Do remember that you can always edit later, but you can't edit a blank page.

✓ Do take a short break.

X Don't buy into the idea of writer's block.

X Don't panic.

X Don't abandon your writing altogether.

Conclusion

Although writing up your research may feel intimidating, remember, you already have ample writing experience. Now it's time to develop a writing discipline. Carve out space and time for writing. Make it a habit. Write when it's fun and flowing and write when it's hard. Remember, it's a process. Go step by step, day by day. If you put in the time and practice, you will become a skilled writer. Who knows? There may even be some magic, too.

Checklist of Considerations

- ☑ Recognize that you already have valuable writing experience.
- ☑ Develop a writing discipline.
  - – Set up a writing schedule.
  - – Create a workspace with all the materials you need for your project.
  - – Create mental space for writing—avoid distractions and write even when it is hard.
  - – Use writing prompts.
- ☑ Engage in all the phases of writing.
  - – Mulling
  - – Outlining
  - – Drafting
  - – Revising and seeking feedback—repeat multiple times
- ☑ Recognize that you can always write. Don't buy into the myth of writer's block. When you're having difficulty, try different strategies to jump-start your writing.

Writing Activities

1. Write a detailed letter to your professor, an external reviewer, a committee member, or a possible research partner telling them about your proposed research project and asking for their support. Consider how to do this successfully. Be polite and professional and provide a detailed but succinct description of your project. Revise the letter at least twice.
2. Develop a writing prompt grounded in your research. To do so, use a snippet of your data (e.g., a sentence from an interview or field note) or use a snippet from your literature review. Write for 45–50 minutes without stopping.