

## On Writing: An Annotated Bibliography

For those who want to think more about the practice of writing, there is a vast array of resources available. In this document, I don't attempt to create an exhaustive list, nor is my approach to evaluating the resources systematic. I aim to help fellow writers weed through some of what's available. As you'll see, I've been reading about writing as a practice broadly, not confining my choices to any one type or genre of writing.

Both the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* regularly post articles about academic writing, so that's one thing that I will simply mention here rather than assess their many offerings individually (though I cite them sometimes in my [newsletter](#)).

I'll update this document periodically as I continue reading. I have a stack of library books on my desk right now! [Suggestions](#) for more books, articles, podcasts, videos, websites, and other materials to include are more than welcome.

Happy reading, and happy writing!

\* \* \*

Akbari, Suzanne Conklin, ed. *How We Write: Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blank Page*. New York: Punctum Books, 2015.

To create this short-essay collection, editor Suzanne Conklin Akbari drew on a spontaneous collaboration between a variety of academic authors, from graduate students to tenured faculty members in various humanities disciplines. Sparked by a blog post on the conditions of scholarly writing, the book's essays reflect the writers' thoughts about academic writing and demonstrate a diversity of practices that they use to accomplish it. As contributor Jeffrey Jerome Cohen concludes, "...no one can tell you how to write, only how he or she writes. That process changes as life proceeds: writing is a mode of living, and therefore must be adaptable" (56). Each of the short pieces in the collection bear out this observation as writers describe the different times of day, locations, and other conditions that they prefer—or have preferred at various points of their career as shifting responsibilities have determined how they write best.

DeSalvo, Louise. *The Art of Slow Writing: Reflections on Time, Craft, and Creativity*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2014.

Louise DeSalvo was a well-published scholar, nonfiction writer, and teacher, renowned for her academic writing on Virginia Woolf and her series of memoirs as well as for her books on writing. As she points out in the preface, *The Art of Slow Writing* is not about her own prescriptions for writing, nor about how she herself writes, but rather is based on research into how successful writers talk about their writing practices in their journals, letters, and interviews. Having mined the archives of writers from D.H. Lawrence to Junot Diaz, DeSalvo advocates for taking the time necessary to develop complex ideas and find their proper expression on the page. The book is broken into five main sections, including how to get started with a project, how to grow as a writer, and even how to

embrace rest as a key component of the writing process. Filled with wonderful quotations from literary luminaries, the book is a great tool for thinking about writing while being a pleasure to read.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

As a manual of writing advice, this thorough compendium presents many useful suggestions on how to approach the process of getting words down on paper and revising drafts, as well as how to think about audiences, seek and incorporate feedback, and develop a writerly voice. Despite his emphasis on practical techniques, Elbow also believes in the magic of writing. He attempts to explain why some writing seems to resonate with readers—the “power” of his book title—and some does not. Starting with techniques for simply producing text, he advises that writers engage in freewriting to begin some projects or to ease their way out of blockages. Later, he recommends several other methods that may apply better for different types of writing, for writing in different contexts, or for writers with specific needs. Elbow’s book suggests that, though writing may include elements of magic, writers can aspire to powerful writing by working diligently and intelligently at their craft, finding the methods that best suit their writing style and goals.

Germano, William. *Getting It Published: A Guide for Scholars and Anyone Else Serious about Serious Books*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Editors at university presses often recommend William Germano’s books, and it’s easy to see why. This particular book provides a helpful overview of the entire publishing process while also packing in a great deal of advice for aspiring authors of academic and serious nonfiction books. (Written in an accessible style, amusing little tidbits even find their way into the book’s margins.) Germano’s expertise comes from his experience as an academic, a university administrator, and an academic publisher, having served as editor-in-chief at Columbia University Press and as vice president and publishing director at Routledge. With chapter titles like “What Editors Look For,” “What a Contract Means,” and “Quotations, Pictures, and Other Headaches,” the book covers everything from basic questions about the functions of a publisher to choosing which publisher is right for your project to promoting your book once it’s done. This is an essential read for writers contemplating the academic book publishing process.

---- *From Dissertation to Book*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

In this book, William Germano returns to the subject of scholarly publishing after his well-regarded volume *Getting It Published*. Here he focuses directly on the challenges of the first-book academic author, explaining why revisions are usually necessary to turn the dissertation—a type of writing designed for the single purpose of achieving an advanced degree—into a book that university presses will want to publish. A slender volume suited to its narrow topic, the book nevertheless contains a great deal of advice, from how to reimagine the material of a dissertation through various “basic options” to reconsidering your writerly style as a newly minted scholar, which Germano engagingly describes as a “professional writer of high-protein nonfiction” (123). Though some of the material from *Getting It Published* reappears, it is specifically tailored to the needs of the first-book author, making this a useful book in its own right.

King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. New York: Scribner, 2000.

Aptly titled, King's book on writing leans heavily on autobiographical detail to inform the reader not only about how he wrote at the time of the book's drafting, but also how he developed his practices. Having begun writing and attempting to publish as an adolescent, King speaks from long and sometimes painful experience, though he narrates it all in dry style. The book is divided into four sections, with the first recalling his early struggles to become a writer. The middle sections are the most closely focused on writing, including King's thoughts on mechanics and good writing practices. To finish the book, he returns to the personal storytelling that dominates its beginning to recount the near-fatal accident he suffered in 1999, during the writing of *On Writing*. Framing writing as part of his rehabilitation, King explores the why of writing and encourages others to engage in its magic. In one of two brief appendixes, he also includes a fairly long sample of a rough draft with mark-ups and editorial commentary—a helpful resource for reluctant revisers.

Kumar, Amitava. *Every Day I Write the Book: Notes on Style*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020.

Written for academic writers, Kumar's book argues that they should work to be good writers themselves. A scholar, journalist, and novelist, Kumar presents his material in a somewhat musing, peripatetic style that nevertheless provides a thought-provoking mix of argument and advice, broken into nine main sections, along with introductory material, appendixes, and notes. Some of the book's most prescriptive material arrives after the main text, in Appendix A, which was drawn from a short text called "Rules for Beginners"—allegedly recommended by V.S. Naipaul—to which Kumar adds some additional tenets based on his own experience. In the main body of the text, he makes a number of interesting suggestions, such as using some creative writing to do the work of scholarship or viewing administrative writing in forms like the recommendation letter as vehicles for flexing writerly muscle (and avoiding drudgery). All together, the book is a contemplative look at writing from a scholar actively seeking ways to write more engagingly and feel more fulfilled by the activity of writing.

Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1994.

This book has become something of a classic in the writer's advice category since it was published a few decades ago. Anne Lamott is a prolific novelist and nonfiction writer who has also been teaching writing for many years. The book is broken into four sections that address the practices of writing itself, gathering material, collaborating with others, and the process of publication. With its breezy, engaging style, the book entertains as it instructs, giving writers practical ideas with memorable names in short chapters—from the "bird by bird" of the book's title to the embrace of "shitty drafts" and "one-inch picture frames." While providing useful advice, Lamott draws on the feelings of vulnerability and frustration she has experienced throughout her career, empathizing with readers while offering actionable suggestions for improving their work.

Silvia Paul J. *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2007.

In addition to publishing a good bit of academic writing, Paul J. Silvia has also partnered with the American Psychological Association to create a few advice books, including this one. Though he writes with psychology scholars in mind, the book can easily apply to academic writers in other disciplines, especially through the author's embrace of a "practical, behavior-oriented approach to

writing” (3). With advice on how to find the time to write, how to stay motivated, and how to navigate publishing journal articles as well as books, the book is a quick read that presents solutions to the problems that beset most writers while balancing the competing demands of academic life.

Sword, Helen. *Stylish Academic Writing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.

Note that this book has an engaging, colon-free title that tells you exactly what it’s about. Within it, Sword advocates that academic authors give greater attention to things like good titles when they address their writing style. But she also systematically surveys academic writing and style guides for academics to investigate what academic writing actually looks like across disciplines as well as what advice—often conflicting—writers glean from academic style manuals. She considers whether they need to feel pressured to conform to pervasive ideas about what makes academic writing fit to publish. After laying this helpful groundwork, Sword turns her focus to providing a detailed style guide of her own, providing chapters that address elements of good writing that academic authors often overlook. These include granular aspects of writing, such as sentence-level complexity, the use of concrete language, and keeping subjects and verbs reasonably close together within sentences, as well as more global concerns like developing a writerly voice and constructing compelling narratives. Sword enlivens each chapter with real-life samples of well-written academic prose drawn from the literature of many fields, along with commentary about what makes that author’s writing “stylish.”