

Chapter 4. Having an Optimal Writing Experience: Cultivating Flow States

Part I: Crossing the Threshold

Threshold Concept: *Expert writers cultivate flow states, states of deep concentration, focus, and immersion, both to make progress on publications but also to experience the intrinsic benefits of writing for publication.*

Why do expert writers, including those with tenure and promotion or even into their retirement—continue to write regularly when they no longer have to? How does this academic publishing process bring them joy? One of the reasons is that they regularly experience a flow state, a state of being widely recognized as an “optimal human experience.” In writing about what makes flow an optimal experience for a human being, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states,

Contrary to what we usually believe, moments like these, the best moments in our lives, are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times. ... The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something we *make* happen. ... for each person there are thousands of opportunities, challenges to expand ourselves. (p. 3).

What Csikszentmihalyi describes is the opportunity when writers enter a deep state of focus, concentration, and connection with their writing—the flow state.

Even if they don't know the term for it, many people have experienced flow states with some regularity. Flow states have several key features, which I've adapted from Jeanne Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) (p. 90):

- A writer experiences “intense and focused concentration” where they are deeply immersed in their writing
- The writer experiences the act of writing as intrinsically rewarding, regardless of what may happen to the text outside of the writing session
- The writer may experience a distortion of time, where they may not realize how much time has passed
- The writer has some sense of mastery—they know what the situation is, how to respond to the situation, and they are in control of the situation
- A writer brings together both their thinking, awareness, and action in writing
- A writer suspends self-judgement or a focus on their skills/abilities and simply immerses themselves in the writing

You can achieve flow states through many different activities—writing, dancing, climbing, painting, playing music, sports, among others (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). You probably have experienced flow states in your life, perhaps not realizing what they were called and not having terminology for this optimal and engaging experience.

Broader research on flow states demonstrates that flow states are intrinsically rewarding, support happiness and positive emotions, and allow for greater focus and depth (Mao et al., 2016; Tse et al., 2020). In fact, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) goes so far to say that flow states are optimal experiences, so optimal that they are some of the best moments of our lives: “Contrary to what we usually believe, moments like these, the best moments in our lives, are not the passive, receptive, relaxing games—although such experiences can also be enjoyable if we’ve worked hard to attain them. The best moments usually occur when a persons’ body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something we make happen ... for each person there are thousands of opportunities, challenges to expand ourselves” (p. 3). Studying adolescent writers, Reed Larson (2012), noted that for writers who achieved flow states, they had enjoyment, clear attention, complete immersion in their work, and creative flow of ideas—benefits that lasted beyond the single experience.

How does an emerging scholar cross this threshold and begin to leverage flow states both for intrinsic enjoyment and academic productivity? For writers in the study, bringing conscious awareness and attention to those flow states and working to actively cultivate them is part of what makes an expert.

Table 4.1 Crossing the Threshold

Flow States in General	T H R E S H O L D	Flow States for Writing for Publication
Lack of awareness of flow states in writing or lack of terminology. Flow states may occur but are not necessarily cultivated.		Conscious cultivation of flow states for writing for publication including managing time, space, distractions, goals, difficulty, and energy levels.
Experiencing flow states in other parts of life: sports, gaming, creative practices.		Recognizing flow states as one of the intrinsic benefits of writing, something to cultivate and look forward to.
Flow states may occur but are not leveraged for productivity.		Using flow states as a productivity maximizing strategy.

As we can see from Table 4.1 one of the things that makes an expert an expert is that they cultivate flow states: they understand themselves and what allows them to deeply focus, they can get into flow states regularly, and ultimately use these to build an enjoyable writing process that is intrinsically rewarding, beneficial, and quite productive.

And yet, while this happens for nearly all writers in the study, flow states are undertheorized, under discussed, and are generally not taught in writing courses. They have been documented in extremely limited ways by researchers exploring adolescent writing (Larson, 1998) and expert faculty writers in three disciplines (Schere, 1998) and briefly mentioned by Kellog (2006) in drawing upon general expertise studies. Before this work, flow states have not been considered or studied directly as part of writing for publication and are generally understudied.⁴ Because flow states are very under-described and under-explored in writing for publication, and due to their importance for the writers in my three studies, I am dedicating a chapter to them here. So, let's delve into the wonderful world of flow states.

Part II: Exploring Flow States

Anyone can experience a flow state, and according to my data, flow states are not dependent on expertise nor experience. Participants in my field-wide writing survey (N=198) included 79 self-identified expert writers, 58 intermediate writers, and 59 novice writers. When asked, "Have you experienced the flow state with your academic professional writing?" 92.9 percent (or 184 participants) indicated "yes." When asked, "How often do you experience the flow state in your academic professional writing?" Participants had a chance to respond to this question as a four-point scale: "frequently," "sometimes," "infrequently," and "I have not experienced this." As Figure 4.1 describes, although novices experience slightly less frequent flow than intermediate or expert writers, a one-way ANOVA reveals that these differences are not statistically significant. This finding suggests that a person of any expertise level has the capacity to experience flow states (although, as we explore later in the takeaways section, the conditions under which flow can happen are easier to achieve for experts). Thus, cultivating a flow state could be a powerful tool for an emerging scholar to support intrinsic benefits with writing.

4. The reason I say this is that while flow is a major experience of professional and expert writers in all kinds of fields, the conditions of flow, as described in this section, may not be as visible to students, particularly undergraduate students in first year composition. Since the bulk of mainstream research in composition studies focuses on undergraduate writing and first-year composition, writing studies scholars have less opportunity to study and understand flow and have almost no research on it. When I teach flow to my undergraduate students, they understand it and leverage it too. For example, John R. Gallagher et al. (2023) uses keywords to explore seven major journals and finds that "writing" and "students" are the top two in all journals. I am hoping that this research will help spark conversations of flow and integrate this important concept into our field, particularly as we have challenges from AI technologies, which cannot replicate intrinsic writing benefits nor flow states.

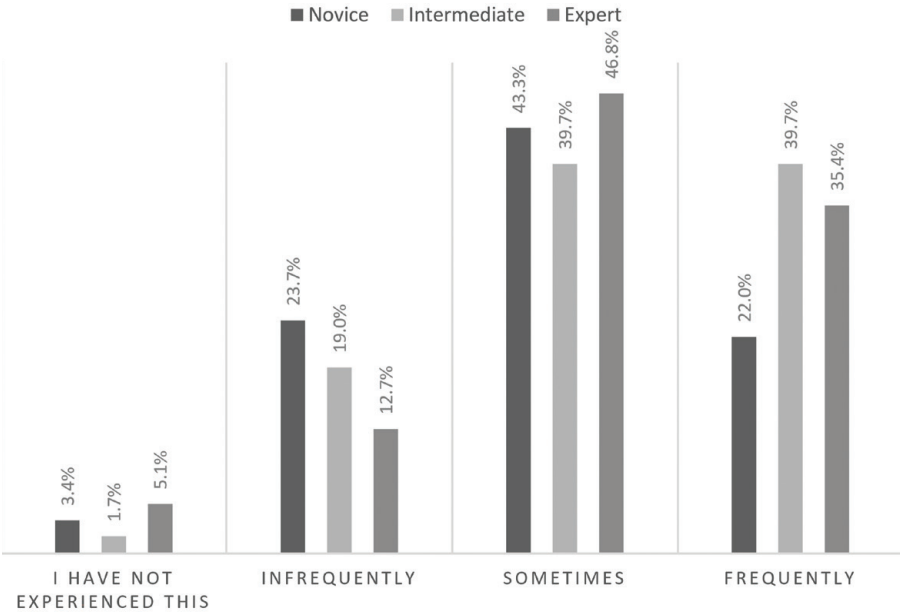


Figure 4.1 Flow states among survey participants by expertise level.

Cultivating Flow in Writing for Publication

Participants in all three studies indicated various methods through which flow happened. Many of them were particularly focused on the conditions under which they were able to achieve flow, which included a careful cultivating of where they wrote, when they wrote, and how they set up their spaces for success. The specific conditions under which writers cultivate flow states depend on the individual writer: their time and daily schedule, family obligations, work obligations, and being able to engage in writing rituals that may help. But what is consistent across all writers who discussed flow is the need to actively cultivate the conditions of flow. So how do writers cultivate flow when writing for publication? Table 4.2 offers the most common conditions described by participants in all three studies.

Let us now explore these conditions in more depth to help you understand some ways in which people cultivate flow states for writing for publication. As Table 4.2 describes, writers may use many different techniques to get into flow, often stacking multiple things (time, no distractions, space, music). For example, an expert writer from the survey described, “I find that the setting for my writing is important—I need relative quiet, physical comfort, preferably a window, a large work surface to spread out notebook computer, notes, etc. I can work anywhere, but this seems essential for reaching the ‘flow’ state.” Danny, an emerging scholar, uses a soundtrack with large headphones, gets comfortable, and just gets into the flow. She also uses mental “tricks” to minimize anxiety so

she can have a more productive and enjoyable writing experience: “I listened to ‘Hotline Bling’ and nothing else with my big over-ear headphones on. That noise is always the same and washes into the background, works really well ... As long as I’m comfortable, I don’t have distractions. I can usually hit that [flow] and it’s often started by doing one of those things that I mentioned before about tricking myself. If I just say like, ‘Oh, I’m going to make a list of things for ten minutes, suddenly it’ll be four hours later. I won’t remember what happened and I’ll have written five pages.”

Table 4.2 Common Conditions Cultivated by Participants to Achieve Flow States

Theme	Details
Block of Time	Creating a larger block of time for writing (one hour to several hours).
No Interruptions	Facilitating an uninterrupted writing experience.
No distractions	Elimination of distractions (including external distractions such as being interrupted when writing or self-imposed distractions such as social media).
Time of Day	Finding an optimal time of day for writing (which varies based on individual; may be tied to the above factors including family and/or work distractions).
Space	Setting up a physically comfortable space for successful working conditions.
Rituals	Developing writing rituals that assist with entering flow (listening to specific music, setting up the space, coffee, treats, etc.).
Good Mood	Feeling mentally in a good headspace which includes not suffering anxiety, severe time constraints, or other negative emotions. Participants may engage in a variety of strategies to minimize anxiety or other detrimental emotions at the start of the writing session (see Chapter 7 for more on minimizing anxiety).

Some writers recognize the value of flow to scholarly production and seek to cultivate it as often as possible. Expert scholar Heather describes the flow state as something that she works hard to achieve as often as possible:

I have ideas that have been sitting and percolating, and I need to be able to access that and make sense of it, so I’ll lock myself away or what-have-you. I ended up getting a chance this past fall when I was working on the manuscript. I knew that I had it, we went to this one-bedroom ski place up in Vermont. ... I just locked myself away and worked. ... inspiration doesn’t happen. You can’t wait for it; you just have to sit down and do it. ... I can sense when that’s going to happen and I can be like, “I really

need to work, nobody interrupt me,” and let that to dive into that thing.

Likewise, expert writer Matt’s strategy for cultivating flow is as follows, “I think if I have time, I will try to cultivate it. I think it does take a little bit more time ... I think that you cultivate it by rereading, getting into the project, rethinking the project goals and just letting yourself be present with it, and not worry too much. You can silence some of your critics a little bit and just work.”

What we can see from these examples is that writers make conscious effort to cultivate the conditions of flow through managing their physical writing space, eliminating distractions, but also working to put themselves in a good mental headspace, such a Danny’s “tricks” and Matt’s “silencing of critics.”

Embodying the Flow State

For some participants, flow is not just about getting deeply immersed in their writing, but also in having an embodied experience, an experience that transcends writing words on a page but that somehow connects with them on a deeply human level. Alice, an expert scholar, describes part of her flow as getting deeply immersed into the historical figures, the literacy heroines, that she is writing about,

I often feel like I spend so much time with this period that I feel like so connected while I’m working, I’m just lost. I look at these pictures and think, “Could I wear that getup?” ... I really feel for these women ... But then something will happen that breaks the spell and it’s like, it’s actually 2020 and it’s not 1920. ... mostly I’m in this mindset of the world that these women lived and worked in. While I hear echoes of contemporary issues everywhere I think about what they were up against and what world must have looked like to them.

In this case, flow allows her to travel back to the time of her literacy heroines to be able to tell their story effectively, to hear their voices, and convey that through her writing.

Likewise, to expert scholar Heather, flow is also a very embodied experience. She describes her whole writing process as embodied with writing on physical paper, looking at data printed out, sticky notes and note cards. She says,

I’m very tuned in to how my body feels when I’m in a good writing space and when I’m not. I don’t let it dictate whether or not I’m writing, but I do let it inform my expectations for the writing session. Sometimes the process of writing will shift while I’m in it and I will move from one state to another. But yeah, I guess the only way I could describe it is when I know that I’m going to

have a really productive writing session ... It's almost like a meditative contemplative thing. Like if you meditate and you know that feeling when you've finally reached a point of peacefulness and you're not distracted, there's not forty things going on in your head, you've really narrowed it down to two or three ideas, then I know I can create a space and go in and just zone in.

For Heather, being able to achieve flow may also help shape her writing process and what she chooses to work on that day.

Writers also indicate that flow is so enjoyable, they may forget or postpone other things to stay in their flow longer. Kathy, an emerging scholar from China, notes this, "I really feel like to write or if I really feel I'm in the flow, I will even postpone other activities like eating or something else."

Flow may also be tied to how neurodiverse or writers with learning differences engage in their experience. One survey respondent, who identifies as neurodiverse, recognizes a connection between flow and hyperfocus, "Flow is related to my disabilities and the ability to hyper focus. Hyper focus can be a frustration that fills working memory too quickly, but it can help writing as well. Strongly felt connections to the subject matter create deep streams of "flow." Hyperfocus is another emerging area of research that needs more study in our field, but it has been explored within medical education (Robinson, 2022) and education (Elsherif et al., 2022). In fact, this body of emerging scholarship suggests that hyperfocus can be extremely beneficial for the neurodiverse writer when they are able to fixate on a project and make substantial progress. From the limited data in this study exploring neurodiverse writers, this appears to be borne out, but more research is needed to more fully explore this phenomenon.

Flow and Writing Processes

Another aspect of flow writing for some participants is that it seems to happen more in certain stages of the writing process, particularly, in the invention and drafting stages. Expert writer Stephanie indicates that she experiences flow 10–20 percent of the time when she writes, and it usually takes her to a certain point in her writing. She says,

I think I need to get to a certain point of what I'm writing in before I hit flow. It's mostly scaffolding and building and putting concepts together and then all of a sudden it clicks and then I'm going. But it takes me a while to get there every time I sit down. Some things that I've tried to do that helps me with that is to go back over the page or two that I was doing before and that helps me get into flow. It's an old saw but I try to leave my work where I knew what I was going to do next. So, I don't have to come back to it completely cold."

Expert writer, Ryan, has a similar experience, indicating that he is primarily able to get into the flow in the middle of a project. He says, “it correlates well with how much I have already done to sort of prepare the way and how much I still have left to do.” He goes on to describe a useful metaphor to flow, horseback riding: “I think like being on a horse, right? I mean when you’re out in a field and riding a horse and it’s very romantic and exciting! And that’s the flow state. Yeah, that’s no, I’m still in the stable like brushing the horse’s hair and putting on the saddle for the first, you know ... chunk of text.” What we can see from these examples is that writers can anticipate when flow will likely happen, help cultivate it, and when it happens, they stay in the flow as long as possible—or, as Ryan says, riding the horse off into the sunset.

Flow and Writing Enjoyment

Ultimately, the flow state is called an “optimal experience” by researchers because, just like riding the horse into the sunset, when writers experience it, it makes them feel great. This is one of the reasons that writers write, ultimately, and why they continue to write long after they no longer have to (for a fuller examination of motivations, please see Chapter 6). Expert scholar Ryan explains his experience of the immersive flow as, “I have never forgotten to pick my kids up, but short of that I’ve forgotten all sort of things, you know just that fall by the wayside, when I’m sort of in that focus ... yeah, and it just feels good.” Matt, another expert writer, shares a similar story, “You start losing track of time. ... that’s just the part where you can get lost in it a little bit, enjoy the writing, and you’re totally present with the writing.”

Part III: Concepts and Activities for Cultivating Flow States

As the above has explored, you can cultivate flow states in writing for publication build your own productivity, enjoyment, and deep engagement with your writing process. This is embodied in our threshold concept for this chapter:

Threshold Concept: *Expert writers cultivate flow states, states of deep concatenation, focus, and immersion, both to make progress on publications but also to experience the intrinsic benefits of writing for publication.*

Many experience flow states when they write for publication by careful cultivation of their writing environment: writing rituals, comfortable spaces, eliminating distractions, and setting up their specific conditions to allow flow to occur. Here are our key takeaways from this chapter:

- Flow states are states of intense focus where a writer gets deeply immersed in their text, loses track of time and may lose themselves in the work. These states are tied not only to high levels of productivity but also to joyful writing experiences and are widely considered an optimal human experience.
- Flow states are quite common in writing for publication, with the majority of participants (95% or more) experiencing flow at least once or more than

once during writing for publication.

- Flow states are carefully cultivated by participants by using multiple strategies including setting aside larger blocks of writing time that are free of distractions or interruptions, working at times of day where they are at their peak efficiency, managing their mood and mental state, cultivating a conducive space for writing, and using various writing rituals (music, tea, etc.) to get into the flow.
- Some writers indicate they highly value flow states and work to cultivate them as often as possible during writing for publication but recognize that it requires time and space to cultivate well.
- Participants also tie flow states to periods where they embody their work—by getting deeply immersed in the subjects they are writing about or attuning to their body as they write.
- Flow states may be more conducive to certain parts of the writing process rather than others (more research is needed in this area).
- Flow states are also tied to “hyperfocus” which is experienced by neurodiverse individuals; more research is needed to better understand this relationship and how neurodiverse individuals may benefit.
- Ultimately, flow states for participants are tied both to productive writing as well as enjoyment. Participants describe how flow states feel good and bring them joy.

Writing Expertise and Flow

But as both Ryan and Stephanie shared, another part of the story of flow comes from the nature of expertise itself—being far enough along in a project that you can have a sense of where you are going and what you will do next. This is where writing expertise comes in—you are never going to get into a flow state if you are stressed, have a million things going on, or feel you are unable to accomplish the task. Flow happens when you know that you can accomplish the task you set out to accomplish and feel confident in your skillset. Thus, drawing up broader flow literature, I now present three baseline conditions for flow. These three conditions are particularly important due to the challenging nature of publication:

- **Challenging but accomplishable writing task.** Writers need to have opportunities that stretch and challenge existing skillsets but also writing challenges that they feel they can accomplish and that are appropriate for their skill level (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).
- **Clear goals, progress and feedback.** Writers need to have a clear sense of where they are going and what they want to accomplish. They also need to be able to have a sense of their own progress to meet their goals, and they need to have some kind of feedback about their progress (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Since many of these things can be challenging for writers, we consider these more fully in Chapters 8 and 9.

- **Intrinsic motivation.** Kellog (2006) offers requirements of getting into flow for expert writers, “Clarity of purpose, a sense of mastery, and high intrinsic motivation further characterize flow” and a “strong motivation to write” (p. 395). We consider motivation and intrinsic motivation more fully in Chapter 7.

From the list above, we can see why flow happens more frequently for expert writers, and why it is largely not discussed in writing studies with student writers, particularly undergraduate writers. Flow is integral to writing expertise for several reasons. First, expert writers have a stronger sense of control, they have skills that can stretch, they can feel that the work is challenging but not overwhelming, and they are more likely to have clearer goals for their writing. Expert writers have also learned how to address the range of emotional challenges in dealing with writing for publication, such as anxiety or imposter syndrome (Chapter 7) that may prevent flow. Drawing on a range of research, Kellog (2006) argues that these require a careful balance of the conditions above; he notes that if the demands of the task exceed one’s ability, then the individual has anxiety. Further, if the task is too easy for an individual, they are bored and cannot achieve flow. We can see how flow is tied to many other factors explored surrounding writing expertise.

Given this work combined with my data above, Table 4.3 describes both the internal and external conditions for cultivating flow.

Table 4.3 Conditions for Cultivating Flow

Internal Conditions	External Conditions
Feeling mentally in a good headspace (not suffering anxiety or other negative emotions); this may include strategies to minimize anxiety or other detrimental emotions at the start of the writing session.	Larger block of time (an hour to several hours).
Having opportunities that stretch and challenge existing skills but can be accomplished and appropriate for the skill level of the individual; that is, not having something that is too easy or too hard (which can lead to frustration).	Uninterrupted writing time, which can include the elimination of distractions (including self-imposed distractions such as social media).
Having a clear sense of purpose, goals, and motivations for the work.	Optimal time of day for writing (which varies based on individual; may be tied to the above factors).
High intrinsic motivation: writing because one feels there is something important to say (further explored in Chapter 7).	Physically comfortable space that is set up for successful working conditions.
Having feedback on performance (both feedback internally in terms of self-evaluation) and external feedback.	Development of writing rituals that assist with entering flow (music, setting, coffee, etc.).

Activity 4.1: Getting into the Flow

The following questions for reflection and discussion can help you explore flow and flow states in your own life:

1. Examine your current conditions for writing and compare them to the Conditions for Flow Chart (Table 4.3).
 - Reflect: What might you be able to do differently to better support states in your life?
2. When have you experienced flow in writing?
 - Did you do anything to cultivate that flow, or did it just happen?
3. What conditions do you need in order to cultivate flow in your writing process?
4. How important do you see the experience of flow to your successful publication?

Activity 4.2: Reflecting on Flow

Many people have experienced flow states in their writing, but they don't necessarily identify them as such or have not had a name for this experience. Thus, it can be helpful for you to reflect on your own writing experiences where you were able to experience the flow state:

Activity 4.3: Experience of Flow

In the coming days or weeks, be on the lookout for flow experiences that may happen in your life—through exercise or sports, through writing, through other creative practices like playing a piano, painting, or knitting a sweater. First consider: Have you experienced flow in other areas of your life? How have you cultivated flow in those areas? Has that taught you anything about your general needs for flow states that could be adapted to your writing process?

Then, be on the lookout for flow states in many different areas of your life. When the flow experience happens, just allow it to happen, paying attention to how you feel in the moment. When you are finished, consider the following:

1. What helped you cultivate the flow experience?
2. How did you feel during the flow experience?
3. In what ways did this experience bring you joy?
4. What can you take from this experience to cultivate flow in your writing?

Activity 4.4: Create a Flow Plan

After evaluating the answers to the first activity in this chapter, and through experiencing flow states in other places in your life, take the time to create a plan to

cultivate the conditions for flow in your writing. Perhaps this includes changing where you write, dedicating longer blocks of time to uninterrupted, developing other writing rituals, and so on.

It may be helpful to create a list of conditions that can support flow—and place that list somewhere where you typically write, to remind you of how to best have an optimal writing experience.

Activity 4.5: Developing Your Writing Rituals

Many emerging and expert writers develop a set of “writing rituals” or activities that you do with regularity to support your writing. They are known as writing rituals because they are “ritualized” in the sense that you do them each time you write. In fact, these writing rituals have a rich history and can be quite odd or quirky, such as Barack Obama’s choice of penning his entire 700-page memoir with a pen and a yellow legal pad, Frederick Schiller’s drawer of rotten apples which he sniffed when the inspiration was running low, or even Maya Angelou’s choice of writing regularly in an empty hotel room (Penguin, 2020). In their survey of over 100 diverse writers, Ann B. Dobie et al. (2002) found that writing rituals typically involved three kinds of patterns: environment, time, and behavior. They noted that some writing rituals could be very idiosyncratic or bizarre, but they worked for the writer specifically because they reduced anxiety, increased power and control, and enhanced writers’ fluency and productivity.

As you begin or deepen your own writing process, consider the rituals that you already do: a cup of tea, a particular soundtrack, setting up your space in numerous ways. Consider also what you might want to cultivate to help you write. Here are some ideas:

- How will you set up a space to write that will allow you to experience flow and be productive? Where is this space? How can you make it as comfortable as possible?
- What can you do to help relax you into the right headspace to write? Perhaps this is a cup of your favorite coffee or tea, a snack, or something else.
- How can you set the ambiance? Many writers create writing soundtracks, either music that is very familiar or instrumental.
- How will you reward yourself after writing for a period of time?
- What happens if you get stuck? Consider the many practices shared in Chapter 2 for facilitating creative ideas, including stepping away, mundane or mindless activity, or daydreaming.

Just to give you an example of writing rituals, I’ll use myself. This book was written and revised primarily by being in the most comfortable and quiet environment possible: in comfortable clothing while sitting on my couch, in bed, or on my porch. When I start to write, I turn off my email and phone, and then I put on a soundtrack primarily composed of instrumental or piano-based video

game music or instrumental post rock with no advertising or people talking. I always have a nice drink: fizzy water, ice water, or tea available. Every 90 minutes or so—or when I get stuck—I take a writing break and then go visit my goose flock outside on my farm. They honk, eat grapes and treats, and graze grass, and I walk through the woods or my gardens with them, and think and sort my thoughts. This usually takes about 10–15 min, at which time, I'd return and write some more. I usually will take a short lunch break and then write again for a few more hours in the afternoon on my writing day. This is my very nuanced process (comfort, geese, music) and your own would obviously look very different.

In the end, the important thing is to create a set of writing rituals and experiences that work for you, also recognizing that these rituals may evolve as you grow in your expertise but also as circumstances may change in your life or work life.