

Academic Writing Playbook

What to do every time you sit down to write

A Free Resource by NCFDD

The Five Modes of Academic Writing

Academic writing is not one type of work. It includes drafting, revising, reading, organizing, and a range of smaller tasks that keep projects moving.

On any given day, you might move between outlining a section, revising a paragraph, reading articles, or figuring out what to work on next. These are different kinds of work, and they require different approaches.

This playbook groups that work into five modes to make it easier to decide what to do in any writing session.



DRAFTING



REVISING



READING



PLANNING



LOW-ENERGY

You'll use these modes to guide your writing sessions.

Writing Session Selector

Start here every time you sit down to write.

STEP 1

How much time and energy do you have?

60+ min
focused

30-60 min
moderate
focus

15-30 min
limited focus

Scattered
distracted or
tired

STEP 2

Where is your work right now?

I don't know what to work on

I need to create new content

I have a draft, but it's not working

I need to read or review materials

I just need to keep things moving

STEP 3 - CHOOSE YOUR MODE

I don't know what to work on

>

Planning & Organization Mode

I need to create new content

>

Drafting Mode

I have a draft, but it's not working

>

Revising Mode

I need to read or review materials

>

Reading & Input Mode

I just need to keep things moving

>

Low-Energy Mode

Pick one task. Finish it. Then decide what's next.

Drafting Mode

Creating New Content

WHEN TO USE THIS

- Starting a new section
- Restarting a stalled project
- You've been thinking but not producing

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY

- Trying to sound polished too early
- Stopping to check sources mid-draft
- Waiting for clarity before writing

This is a work in progress. You are creating material to revise later.

TASK MENU -- CHOOSE ONE TASK FOR THIS SESSION

High focus 45-60+ min

- ☐ Draft a full section (intro, methods, discussion)
- ☐ Write 2-3 paragraphs developing a core argument
- ☐ Turn outline bullets into full sentences

Moderate 30-45 min

- ☐ Draft one complete paragraph
- ☐ Write a rough version of a key claim
- ☐ Expand notes into a partial section

Limited 15-30 min

- ☐ Write bullet points for a section
- ☐ List the main ideas to include
- ☐ Start a paragraph without finishing it

No editing. No formatting citations. No re-reading everything.

If stuck, skip the hard part, leave a note, and keep going.

WHEN TO STOP

When the task is complete or your time is up.

Reading and Input Mode

Supporting your writing with sources

WHEN TO USE THIS

- You need sources before continuing
- Building context or background for a section
- Reviewing literature for a project

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY

- Reading without producing usable output
- Gathering far more sources than needed
- Losing track of how sources connect to your writing

Reading should produce something you can use in your writing

TASK MENU -- CHOOSE ONE TASK FOR THIS SESSION

High focus 45-60+ min

- ☐ Read and fully annotate one article
- ☐ Write a short synthesis paragraph
- ☐ Extract key quotes into your draft

Moderate 30-45 min

- ☐ Skim and identify relevant sections
- ☐ Summarize one source in your own words
- ☐ Connect a source to your argument

Limited 15-30 min

- ☐ Highlight key passages in a saved article
- ☐ Add source notes to a draft section
- ☐ Organize saved articles by project

Always leave with something you can use directly in your writing.

WHEN TO STOP

When the task is complete or your time is up.

Revising Mode

Improving Existing Work

WHEN TO USE THIS

- You have a draft
- Something feels off — structure or clarity
- Preparing for submission or peer review

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY

- Mixing structural and sentence-level edits
- Rewriting before the argument is clear
- Over-editing before structure is set

Do not mix structural and sentence-level editing in the same session

START BY CHOOSING THE TYPE OF REVISION

STRUCTURAL (big picture)

- ☐ Reorder sections for better flow
- ☐ Clarify the main claim or argument
- ☐ Add, cut, or combine sections
- ☐ Strengthen transitions
- ☐ Check each section serves the argument

SENTENCE-LEVEL (fine detail)

- ☐ Tighten wordy paragraphs
- ☐ Clarify one confusing sentence
- ☐ Cut filler language
- ☐ Improve readability and sentence variety
- ☐ Fix grammar and mechanics

Pick one type. Not both. One session, one revision mode.

Structural revision should happen before sentence-level editing.

WHEN TO STOP

When one section or revision task is complete.

Planning & Organization Mode

Keeping projects on track

WHEN TO USE THIS

- You're unsure what to work on
- Multiple projects and feeling scattered
- Progress has stalled or a deadline shifted

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY

- No defined next steps, only vague goals
- Too many open projects, no clear priority
- Treating planning as procrastination

Every project should have a clear next action.

TASK MENU

- ☐ Identify your current priority project
- ☐ Define the next 1-3 concrete actions
- ☐ Break a large section into smaller steps
- ☐ Update status on each active project
- ☐ Decide what to work on this week
- ☐ Review upcoming deadlines
- ☐ Identify one project to defer

PROJECT TEMPLATE

Project: _____

Current stage: _____

Next action: _____

Deadline: _____

What's blocking me: _____

Stop when you know exactly what to work on next

Low-Energy Mode

Making progress when time or focus is limited

WHEN TO USE THIS

- Scattered, distracted, or tired
- You have 15-30 minutes or less
- Deep focus isn't available right now

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY

- Believing short sessions don't count
- Skipping work because it feels too small
- Waiting for a bigger block to start

Small actions still move projects forward.

MAINTENANCE TASKS

- ☐ Format and clean up citations
- ☐ Organize and rename project files
- ☐ Update your notes on a project
- ☐ Review and reread previous writing
- ☐ Clean up your bibliography

LIGHT PROGRESS TASKS

- ☐ Respond to a co-author email
- ☐ Add comments or notes to a draft
- ☐ Read and annotate one short article
- ☐ Outline a section in bullets
- ☐ Export or back up files

Stop when your time runs out. Every small task is progress.

If You're Stuck

A quick reset for any writing session

If you're not making progress, identify what's actually happening first. Then pick the right mode and choose the smallest possible task.

IDENTIFY THE ISSUE

I don't know what to do next	>	Planning & Organization Mode
I keep avoiding the writing	>	Drafting Mode (pick the smallest task)
My draft isn't working	>	Revising Mode (structural first)
I need more input before I can continue	>	Reading & Input Mode
I'm overwhelmed or low on energy	>	Low-Energy Mode

RESET ACTION

- 1 Pick the mode that matches your situation above.
- 2 Choose the **smallest possible task** from that mode.
- 3 Set a short time window. Even 15 minutes counts.
- 4 Begin. Adjust from there.

You do not need perfect conditions to make progress.
You need a clear mode, a defined task, and a place to start.
That is enough.

Keep Your Writing Momentum Going

The strategies in this handbook can help you make meaningful progress on your writing. But sustainable writing productivity rarely comes from working harder or waiting for more time to appear.

Many faculty find that accountability, structure, and a supportive community make the difference between good intentions and consistent progress.

Whether you're looking to establish a regular writing habit or manage multiple writing projects more strategically, NCFDD offers programs designed to help faculty move their work forward.

Ready for Your Next Step?

14-Day Writing Challenge

Build a consistent writing practice with daily accountability, focused writing sessions, and support from a community of scholars.

[Join the FREE 14-Day Writing Challenge.](#)

Building Your Publishing Pipeline

Learn how to manage multiple writing projects, prioritize strategically, and create a sustainable system for long-term publication success.

[Explore Building Your Publishing Pipeline.](#)

Join thousands of faculty who have used NCFDD programs and courses to create more consistent writing progress and stronger publication momentum.