



The Sane Semester Checklist:

Five Steps to Protect Your Writing,
Priorities, and Time



A Free Resource by NCFDD



Starting the Semester with Intention

The start of a new semester often brings a mix of anticipation and pressure. Courses are beginning, projects are moving forward, and new requests are already appearing on the calendar.

Without a moment to pause and reflect, the semester can quickly become shaped by urgency rather than intention.

The **Sane Semester Checklist** offers a short planning exercise to help you clarify your priorities, protect your writing time, and establish a few simple structures that support consistent progress throughout the term.

You can complete the checklist in about 30 minutes. A small amount of reflection at the beginning of the semester can help the months ahead feel more manageable and focused.

5 Foundations of a Sane Semester

A productive semester rarely happens by accident. It develops when a few simple structures are in place before the pace of the term accelerates. The checklist that follows focuses on five areas that shape how sustainable and productive a semester ultimately feels.

1. Protect Your Writing Time



Writing and research are the first activities to disappear when schedules become crowded. Protecting writing time early ensures that your core scholarly work continues even during busy periods. Consistent writing sessions—even short ones—create momentum and make large projects more manageable.

2. Clarify Your Real Priorities



Many faculty enter the semester with long lists of goals but limited clarity about which projects matter most right now. Identifying a small number of priorities helps ensure that time and attention go toward the work that advances your research, teaching, and professional development.

3. Set Boundaries Before Requests Multiply



Service requests, collaborations, committees, and administrative responsibilities often expand to fill whatever space is available. Deciding in advance what you will and will not take on makes it easier to respond thoughtfully when new requests appear.

4. Build Accountability and Support



Faculty work can feel isolating, especially when trying to maintain consistent writing or research progress. Many successful scholars rely on small structures of accountability (writing groups, mentors, collaborators, or structured programs) to maintain momentum.

5. Plan for the Reality of the Semester



Even carefully planned semesters encounter unexpected disruptions: deadline changes, teaching challenges, family responsibilities, or institutional demands. Planning for flexibility allows you to adjust while continuing to make progress on the work that matters most.

The Sane Semester Checklist

Take a few minutes to review each section and check off what you have already put in place. Circle any items that need attention.

1. Protect Your Writing Time

Research progress rarely happens by accident. It happens when writing time is scheduled before everything else fills the calendar.

- ☐ I have identified specific weekly writing blocks in my calendar.
- ☐ My writing time is scheduled at times when my energy is highest.
- ☐ I know which project will receive priority this semester (article, grant, book chapter).
- ☐ I have identified a realistic weekly writing goal.
- ☐ I have a backup writing task for low-energy days (editing, reading, citations, outlining).
- ☐ I have at least one accountability structure in place (writing group, colleague check-in, challenge, or program).

2. Clarify Your Semester Priorities

A sane semester requires deciding what matters most before the semester decides for you.

- ☐ I have identified my top three priorities for the semester.
- ☐ I know which projects will move my career forward the most.
- ☐ I have reviewed major deadlines (grants, manuscripts, reviews, promotion milestones).
- ☐ I have identified one project that will intentionally wait until next semester.

3. Set Boundaries Early

Many faculty overload their schedules because they start saying “no” only after things become overwhelming.

- ☐ I have identified requests I will decline this semester.
- ☐ I have prepared a simple script for responding to new requests.
- ☐ I have protected at least one block of uninterrupted focus time each week.
- ☐ I have reviewed my service commitments for balance and sustainability.

4. Build Your Support System

Faculty productivity is rarely a solo effort. Sustainable progress usually involves community, accountability, and support.

- ☐ I know who I will reach out to when the semester becomes stressful.
- ☐ I have identified one colleague or mentor for periodic check-ins.
- ☐ I have joined or created a writing or accountability structure.
- ☐ I have identified resources that support my work and well-being.

5. Prepare for the Unexpected

Even the best plans encounter disruption. The goal is not perfection. It is having a plan you can return to.

- ☐ I have identified a backup writing schedule if my week becomes chaotic.
- ☐ I know which commitments I will adjust first if workload becomes unsustainable.
- ☐ I have identified one practice that helps me reset (walk, reflection, weekly planning).

How Faculty Sustain Momentum Throughout the Semester

Faculty across disciplines have developed sustainable habits for protecting their writing time, clarifying priorities, and navigating the many demands of academic life. Many first developed these practices through NCFDD's Faculty Success Program (FSP) and continue to apply them throughout the semester to maintain momentum on their work.

Finding Momentum in the Midst of Academic Demands



"The program helped me re-establish my research agenda during my second semester in my first year on the tenure track and maintain momentum on my work even during challenging personal moments. I was also struggling with burnout. During FSP, I wrote and submitted a conference abstract, wrote a conference presentation, and made progress on an article and my book proposal. I've found that daily writing can be a really incredible way for me to make progress on work during the semester. I've also seen how having a strategic plan can lessen some of the challenges associated with burnout by reducing my daily decision-making."

Brooke Dinsmore, PhD | Assistant Professor | Christopher Newport University

Key Insight: Establishing a strategic plan and daily writing routine helped sustain research momentum and reduce burnout during the tenure-track transition.

Investing in Yourself as a Scholar



"FSP gave me a greater appreciation for self-care and I have learned the importance of work-life balance. I have also learned to see my strengths in a more positive light. The most valuable part was the small group and learning how to put together a strategic plan. I would others to invest in themselves and definitely join the program. The information provided will be useful for all stages of your career."

Shariece A. Evans, PhD | Teaching Faculty | University of Maryland Baltimore County

Key Insight: Structured planning and supportive peer communities help faculty recognize their strengths and build sustainable academic careers.

Reclaiming Time Through Clear Priorities



"The program gave me the tools needed to organize my work and priorities and execute. I now have my weekends for me rather than pushing big items off to so called 'down time'. This down time is now for me.

I would tell someone who's thinking about joining to take advantage of the tools and resources to help you hone in on goals and create realistic strategies to get there. You will be amazed how these simple tactics can make a world of difference in both your productivity and life balance."

Wendy Ellis, DrPH | Assistant Professor | The George Washington University

Key Insight: Organizing priorities and using simple planning tools can improve productivity while protecting personal time and work-life balance.

Want to Have a Sane Semester EVERY Semester?

If you've taken a few minutes to work through this checklist, you've already done something many faculty rarely have the opportunity to do: pause and think intentionally about how the semester will unfold.

The Faculty Success Program (FSP) builds on these same habits, helping faculty turn them into sustainable systems for writing productivity, planning, and accountability.

FSP Participants Report:

- 94% improved writing productivity
- 89% better work-life balance
- 97% overall satisfaction

With coaching, structure, and a supportive community, many faculty find that these practices become part of how they approach every semester.

Learn more about the Faculty Success Program!

[Explore the Program](#)

