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## The LU PhD Writing Lab

Helping PhD students build effective and sustainable writing habits, one writing snack at a time

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# The LU PhD Writing Lab

## Helping PhD students build effective and sustainable writing habits, one writing snack at a time

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**Abstract**—The LU PhD Writing Lab began in 2019 as a collaboration between CEE and Dokt to support PhD students in building better writing habits and to combat the sense of isolation that PhD students often feel when writing. Originally an in-person writing group, it was transformed during the pandemic into an online group with a self-enrolment Canvas course as a hub where participants could learn about the concept, find guided writing sessions (which run over Zoom), and connect with other PhD students around the university. Each guided writing session follows a set structure that is easily adapted to independent writing and also to other writing-related activities in the research process. In this round table, we will describe the writing sessions and share reflections and lessons learned. We will also invite the audience to ask questions and share their own stories of building writing habits.

### I. INTRODUCTION

AS doctoral students, we are at once students, teachers, researchers, time managers, and project leaders. This can make it difficult to find the time and motivation to prioritize writing, especially amid other tasks that seem more urgent. When we do manage to make time for writing, it can feel challenging and lonely. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us have struggled even more with finding motivation and a sense of community. But we still have to write, pandemic or not, if we want to complete our studies. In this paper and in our round table at the conference, we will discuss how a locally run writing group can help.

In her book, *Write no matter what*, Joli Jensen distinguishes between two types of writing groups: those that offer critique on written content and those that offer support for the actual writing process [1]. As academia is built upon systems of critical review and scrutiny, Jensen argues that “[w]hat academic writers need (and rarely get) is support for the writing process itself” (p. 137). The LU PhD Writing Lab does exactly this. It began in 2019 as a collaboration between the Centre for Engineering Education (CEE) at LTH and the Doctoral Student Guild at TLTH (Dokt). From the perspective of the student union, the ambition was to create a better working environment for doctoral students at Lund University by providing a time and place dedicated to writing. In addition to decreasing the sense of solitude and social isolation, the Writing Lab aims to support PhD students in building better and more sustainable writing habits, and provides tools to help PhD students make their writing more effective, minimize distractions, and tame their inner critic so it works *for* them rather than against them.

### II. THE DESIGN OF THE WRITING LAB

Originally an in-person writing group, the Writing Lab was transformed during the pandemic into an online group with a self-enrolment Canvas course [2] as a hub where participants can learn about the concept, find guided writing sessions (which run over Zoom), and connect with other PhD students around the university. Each guided writing session follows a set structure inspired by the concepts of *snack writing* [3], *units* [4], and *shut up and write* [5].

#### A. The overall structure

Before you start, it is a good idea to block the time for a session in your schedule and notify anyone who might expect to be able to reach you. That way, you have a better chance of avoiding interruption from the outside. A typical guided writing session has five parts:

1. **Warm up:** Spend five minutes writing down what you will work on in this session. This can be a sort of icebreaker to help you get started and ensure you focus on a specific task for the session.
2. **Briefly share your plan with your group:** Nothing fancy. Just say the words out loud. This creates a sense of accountability for the session, reinforcing your commitment to a specific task.
3. **Write:** The exact time can vary, but ideally something between 45 and 90 minutes. Commit to focused work the whole time. Put your phone on airplane mode, and (if you’re not meeting in Zoom) turn your Wi-Fi off or (if you are meeting in Zoom) quit your email program. Close everything unrelated to your writing task. If you need help, consider using a website blocker or an app blocker. For longer sessions, take a break halfway through.
4. **Wrap up:** This is important for building a resilient writing process that survives interruption. Take five minutes to summarize for yourself what you’ve done and what to do next time. This will create a transition to your next snack and make it easier to pick up where you left off.
5. **Reflect and discuss:** Chat about how your writing went. The social part of these sessions helps combat isolation and build a sense of community. The reflection also provides an opportunity to discuss and vent about the writing process, instead of the content, together with others.

After the session, make a point of stepping away from your screen and taking a real break for at least ten or fifteen minutes. Mental rest is a vital part of building sustainable writing habits.

### B. Two main kinds of work

Usually, you would choose between two main options in a writing session:

- A. **Writing:** The focus is to generate content that you can revise later. Here, you **turn your inner critic off**. Don't worry about checking references or inserting proper citations. Leave comments for yourself instead. Likewise, if you can't find the word you're looking for, just leave it for now, or write a corresponding word in your native language if possible. There's no such thing as bad writing here. You will come back and revise it later. Now all you need to worry about is getting your thoughts written down, perhaps in a stream-of-consciousness approach, so you can begin to manipulate them.
- B. **Revising:** This is where you revise existing text. Here, **your inner critic gets to play**. You organize, reorganize, rewrite, rethink. Revising involves making substantial changes to the organization, content, and argument in a text. It is different from editing, which looks at details and focuses mainly on correcting errors. Revising is something you should start doing early in the writing process, whereas most editing is best left until later in the writing process. It is usually helpful to do one thing at a time when revising, and to make multiple passes to address different things each time.

The idea is to keep these two activities separate at least some of the time. This will help you develop your ability to get ideas out of your head and into a document without getting wrapped up in the exact wording. Especially when working with complex and/or substantial texts, many writers find it much more effective to draft and revise in multiple iterations, rather than trying to think out everything in their heads before beginning to write.

## III. EXPERIENCES FROM PARTICIPATING

*"I have written something rather than nothing!"*

Indeed, having written just a little – a bite-sized text, if you will – is better than nothing. In a brief survey, our participants say that the Writing Lab helps with *prioritizing writing* by having allocated time in their schedule; *removing distractions* to improve writing efficiency; *gaining motivation* through a sense of *accountability*; and *feeling connected* to a writing *community* that makes the writing process less lonely. All quotes in this section are from the survey answering the question: "What have you gotten out of the Writing Lab?"

*"Dedicated writing times in my schedule, with a feeling of group support."*

Participants agree that it is easy to deprioritize writing for the benefit of more "urgent" tasks, such as meetings, conferences, and teaching. The regular writing sessions serve

as a reminder as well as an opportunity to get hands-on tips and build habits around writing. Having a scheduled time for joint writing helps participants respect their own time and interests more and makes it easier to go offline and postpone incoming demands and requests from others. Not checking your email constantly, or as the first thing in the morning, lets you take control of your time, instead of letting somebody else set your day's agenda [6].

*"More focused writing time with more clearly defined tasks."*

Participants also say that the prompt to remove all distractions is helpful – and needed – to get on with more challenging writing tasks. As one participant put it: "When I sit down and write on my own (and don't have a tight deadline), I tend to subconsciously switch over to some less demanding task like answering emails [...]". The strict framing of the Writing Lab holds space for more difficult and time-consuming writing activities. The weekly reminder of the importance of deep work and focused writing is another benefit from the sessions, and helps these good writing (and working) habits carry over to days without guided sessions.

*"If I tell people that I'll be working on a thesis chapter for the next two hours, I won't drift over to something else"*

Many participants say that telling others what they will work on builds a sense of accountability that allows them to write more efficiently during each session. The mere presence of other people also influences participants' motivation to perform and stay on task, much in the same way that group exercise classes work. Some participants say that live sessions and more emphasis on the social aspect over a longer time period would build even stronger accountability and presumably also better focus. In a post-pandemic world, this will be an important consideration.

*"...motivation, knowledge, and hands-on tips [...] helped me with my academic writing"*

Finally, the writing community itself offers emotional support and makes the writing process less lonely and more enjoyable. At the beginning of each session, participants can bring up tasks that they are struggling with and that require the additional focus enabled in the Writing Lab. At the end, participants can share their successes and challenges and support and encourage each other over the work achieved. In academic work, it is important to share not just our academic successes, but also our failures [7, 8]. As with all learning, failure is part of the process. Allowing space to talk about failure and frustration can normalize these things and, by showing that they are shared experiences, might further combat the loneliness and shame some PhD students feel when they are struggling.

### A. Spinoff activities

An important characteristic of the Writing Lab project is that the participants are able and encouraged to use the concept outside the scheduled sessions and adapt it to their own needs. In the survey and in anecdotal feedback since the Writing Lab began, many participants have reported starting

groups of their own, in some cases simply because they wanted to work locally rather than elsewhere. Most of these spin-off writing groups have flourished at the department level, among PhD students looking for writing support and an opportunity to socialize around writing within their immediate collegial contexts. COVID-19 and the working-from-home requirements have been catalysts for the formation of such groups, due to increased social isolation in combination with better access to and comfort with online meeting tools. Intra-departmental and inter-departmental sessions can fill different purposes here, since they may inherently focus more on content-specific and process-related issues, respectively. The discussions in the beginning and end of each session can provide an opportunity for informal conversations about vital aspects of academic work, no matter whether you're proud that you made progress or frustrated that you didn't.

#### IV. FINAL REMARKS

Writing is not simply a way for us to communicate what we think and know. It transforms our cognitive abilities [9], changing how we think and thereby what we *can* know. The writing process is vital to all academic research but often seems to receive insufficient attention in doctoral education, the starting point of an academic career. Unfortunately, many PhD students feel it is unacceptable for them to be unavailable for a few hours to write without disruption. This is counterproductive! PhD students *need* the space to write and tools and support to learn and improve their writing.

##### A. Recommendations to supervisors

We think that supervisors have an essential role to play in developing and supporting PhD student writing. Based on our own experience running and participating in the LU PhD Writing Lab and the response we have received from participants, we invite PhD supervisors to remember and/or consider the following:

- PhD students have a lot to learn about academic writing *as a process* and *as part of the research process*, not just as a straightforward task of “writing it up” once the research is done.
- PhD students need regular time to write, throughout the entire research process, and will always benefit from your encouragement to do so.
- Do your best to respect the times when your PhD students say they are unavailable because they're writing.
- Try using the concept of snack writing within your own research group. You can also adapt it to work for reading, analysis, and other parts of the research process. You might even join in!

How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.

How do you write a thesis? One writing snack at a time.

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