
Fill The Reservoir



Do you have trouble getting started with your writing? Would developing an outline first reduce your anxiety, help you organize your thoughts, and provide a roadmap for writing in manageable chunks?

I thank Michael Zigmond and Beth Fischer of the University of Pittsburgh for teaching me this strategy. I use it, and I love it. It's a special kind of outlining that provides great comfort to those of us who panic when starting a new writing project. It can be very effective in jump-starting your writing and moving it forward more quickly.

When faced with a new writing project, let's say a 30-page article for a journal submission, **first write the title**. Then insert your **major headings** into the document. Next add **subheadings**. If there's **another level of subheadings** below that, add those next. Now go back and add **topic sentences**, that is, a sentence describing the primary point or focus of each paragraph needed to develop that section.

The longer the draft, the more useful this technique can be. It helps you:

- Develop the content and its sequencing before you begin writing;
- Identify all the primary points you need by section and subsection, which is especially useful if you do this for each section or chapter in a longer document before you start to write;
- Move content from section to section to reorganize ideas before, not after, writing; and
- Write more quickly with these guideposts to move your thinking and writing forward.

Filling the reservoir with your ideas before starting to write makes beginning to write each day much less stressful. Do you think filling the reservoir will make you a more productive (and less anxious) writer? **Try it. See if it works for you.**

2 Set a goal for every day between now and when you plan to defend.

Having a goal will help you.

- Focus on what you need to do in the time you have scheduled (rather than time available) for writing.
- Limit extraneous tasks and writing.
- Be accountable – your goal can be shared with others to help you stay on task and on track.

Remember, your goal should be something **small** that you can do **soon** (next 24 hours). Write specific daily goals for at least one week in advance. Remember to use your lists:

- What I must do **after** my writing is complete (*pay bills, get groceries, prepare for class, email advisor with a progress update*).
- What I must do **later** to be ready to write productively tomorrow (*download book, read and take notes on 3 articles, edit yesterday's writing*).
- And, what I want to focus on when I **return to write** (*5 minutes before you stop each writing session, write down as quickly as you can what comes next, and next, and next, and next. Then when you start writing again, you have a roadmap that gets you to more productive writing more quickly*).

Beyond your daily writing goals for the next week, and then weekly writing goals through the completion of your project, you also need writing-related goals. These also move your writing project forward. (Regular meetings with and communication with your advisor; data analysis; more reading; and you should schedule time for sleep, exercise, and eating in healthy ways at regular intervals.) Make a plan, goals and schedule for these writing-related activities as well.

3 What obstacles are you likely to encounter in your writing and meeting your goals? What are the biggest challenges and roadblocks ahead of you?

Write these down, and add to your list as new ones occur. Then search your “toolkit” for what will work to help you overcome this obstacle. If you encounter a new obstacle and there’s no strategy in your toolkit to address it? Review the Productive Writing Strategies list. Ask someone. But don’t let this obstacle stop your progress.

4 What will I do to be accountable?

Will you have a writing buddy? Will you work with a writing support group? A virtual community? Will you share your goals with your spouse, partner, roommate, bathroom mirror?

5 What will you do to celebrate when you are done?

Writing can become its own reward – a terrible first draft is a good start! But it can be encouraging to think about the sense of accomplishment, perhaps relief, and new adventures ahead when you finish this milestone. You can do this!