Review of the book *Write to the Top! How to Become a Prolific Academic.*

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Abstract:

Reviews the book, Write to the top! How to become a prolific academic by W. Brad Johnson and Carol A. Mullen (2007). This is a worthy addition to the family of books about academic writing. It offers practical and informal advice learned the hard way. Beyond their advice about writing itself, Johnson and Mullen offer good advice about working with collaborators, finding mentors, planning projects, managing many writing projects at once, and developing a systematic body of work. Mentorship in particular receives a lot of attention; few writing books have anything to say about this important aspect of academic writing.

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Article:

“Just put them in there—it's a requirement,” advised the professor overseeing my promotion-and-tenure materials. “You can take them out afterward.” I had been grumbling about numbering each publication in my CV, a practice that bothers me. Gunslingers notch their holsters, human epicenters of STD outbreaks notch their bedposts, and academics count their publications: CV tabulation is the closest most of us get to itchy trigger fingers and crusty sheets. But I caved, of course; as required by the Provost Office's forms, I counted my publications and numbered each one.

The dialectic of quantity versus quality is one of psychology's oldest: it ranks among venerable dialectics such as experimental versus correlational designs, basic versus applied research, and coffee drinkers versus deviants who mock us with their water and their tea. As researchers, we aspire to publish significant work—work that is cited, debated, and remembered, or at least read. But as pragmatists, we sense that the culture of modern universities prefers quantity, especially when grant dollars are the units being quantified. And as realists, we notice that the standards for hiring and promotion are higher than they used to be. More researchers are submitting more papers per year; as a result, rejection rates rise, and new journals emerge to handle the overflow. Publishing one or two great papers no longer establishes an assistant professor as a rising star; two dozen good publications, however, may do the trick.

It's a shame that the new, high standards require writing—a hard and painful activity—instead of behaviors that come naturally to academics. If deans and provosts expected us to complain more bitterly about parking or to dress more casually, most professors would easily adapt. But when expected to publish more, professors will need help. Sensing a market, publishers have released many new books about academic writing. Robert Boice's (1990) Professors as Writers is the revered ancestor of the group; newcomers include books by Kitchin and Fuller (2005), Kendall-Tackett (2007), and me (Silvia, 2007), which show professors how to write more often, how to publish work more effectively, and how to write less badly.

Johnson and Mullen's Write to the Top! is a worthy addition to the family of books about academic writing. If you liked the books mentioned earlier, you would like this book, too. Like the other books, Write to the Top! offers practical and informal advice learned the hard way. Johnson and Mullen's book stands out, however, in its purpose. The first two sentences of the Preface say it all:

This brief guide to writing is designed to help any academic become not only productive, but truly prolific. By prolific we mean writing and publishing a great deal and generally beyond even the most rigorous university norms for productive scholarship. (p. xiii)

Such candor is refreshing; you know where the authors stand. And the text of Write to the Top! makes good on the Preface's promise: this book truly is about how to publish like a madman, madwoman, or precocious madchild.

Books on productive writing fall on a spectrum. Boice (1990), on one end, introduced an “easy does it” approach to writing. He described how to get unstuck (e.g., free writing, contingency management) and how to write a little each day. My book (Silvia, 2007), in the middle of the spectrum, offered advice for people who struggle with writing during the frenzied workweek, in which service and teaching absorb our time. I recommended writing only during the normal workweek; evenings and weekends deserve activities less boring than writing, such as catching up on TV, collecting replica ninja weapons, and updating our holster notches.

Johnson and Mullen, in contrast, describe how to publish a monstrous amount; their book falls on the “high quantity” end of the spectrum. The authors' goal is not to motivate the reader to adopt a slow but steady approach; they want to teach the reader how to have a prolific, decades-long career. Write to the Top! is rooted in psychology and education, so the readers of this journal will find it easy to relate to the stories and struggles described by the authors. Sixty-five essays, grouped loosely into chapters, provide advice about writing and publishing. The essays are short, and the book is easy and interesting to read. The book's tone is an intriguing mix of the tender-minded and the tough-minded. Along with advice about contingency management and self-reinforcement, for example, we are told

Every encounter with one's self or one's psyche, whether through journaling or brainstorming, should become an experience in stimulation, invigoration, and contemplation. Any creative

conception needs the writer to look beyond, simultaneously drawing cues from outside one's self and from within. (p. 77)

Boice's (1990) behaviorism this isn't.

But back to the tips: how can we become prolific academics? In some respects, the advice offered by Boice's book and my book is a subset of the advice in Write to the Top! Johnson and Mullen recommend making a writing schedule and protecting writing time dogmatically; Boice and I would agree. But they also recommend writing in unexpected free time; canceling an appointment if you are writing "in the zone"; writing during evenings, weekends, and holidays; and even taking a "writing vacation," which is a vacation of writing, not the more typical and desirable vacation from writing.

I confess to mixed feelings about some of these recommendations. Perhaps I am too set in my ways; writing 16 hours a week (two full workdays, the amount recommended by Johnson and Mullen) seems like a lot. Or perhaps my ambivalence proves the point that Johnson and Mullen wish to make: prolific writing requires dedication, time, and sacrifice. If going from "productive" to "prolific" requires tilting the work–life scale toward work, then my approach will keep people stuck at "productive." But perhaps we needn't sacrifice our evenings and weekends to publishing another article, another book, or another book review. People can develop expertise in academic writing; this expertise comes only with practice, but it transforms how people write. Experts have learned strategies and skills that allow them to create better work in less time. Can an expert write as much in 4 hours a week as a novice writes in 10 hours? Can someone be a prolific academic during the week and an accomplished topiary gardener on the weekends?

Beyond their advice about writing itself, Johnson and Mullen offer good advice about working with collaborators, finding mentors, planning projects, managing many writing projects at once, and developing a systematic body of work. Mentorship in particular receives a lot of attention; few writing books have anything to say about this important aspect of academic writing. Taken together, Write to the Top! portrays prolific writers as collaborative, organized, reflective, and resilient. If you don't think that this describes you, don't despair: the book describes how to develop good skills and habits.

Becoming prolific is probably not a good goal for everyone, but what if it were? I wonder what the landscape of academic writing would look like if we all aspired to publish "beyond even the most rigorous university norms for productive scholarship" (p. xiii). Would the university norms simply drift upward? What would our journals look like? And would we all be too busy writing to read them?

References

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