


ACADEMIC MUSE

PART TWO OF THE SERIES

A woman in a long, dark dress stands in silhouette in a misty forest. The trees are bare and tall, with a soft, hazy light filtering through the fog. The scene is atmospheric and evocative.

CLEARING
YOUR
WAY

ALAN KLIMA

TECHNIQUES TO GET IT FINISHED
AND MOVE ON TO WHAT YOU REALLY WANT TO WRITE

Clearing Your Way

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Dear Writer,

The first eBook was titled “How I Doubled My Daily Word Count,” which has got to raise some eyebrows, title-wise. Perhaps it would be better entitled “How I Halved My Writing Time.” But double sounds better because it’s like... more.

Of course, writing more words is not necessarily better. The benefits of clarifying what you are about to do before you do it go much farther than that. It’s about writing with purpose, about focus, about framing writing in our attention. And it’s about writing with more ease, which leads to all the greater things like quality prose and innovative form.

This eBook is part 2, although I changed the title to “Clearing Your Way” because it is just so important it deserves it’s own title.

I start with a simple technique for sorting out priorities with a current project, and end with a matter to contemplate which is absolutely essential to bringing ease and flow to your writerly output. This last part works quite well with the daily 5 minute beat sheet, but eventually I recommend that it become the basis of all your work.

Stay tuned for some much more specific techniques which will focus on dealing with giant hot messes, and absorbing a sense of prose style and form.

Wishing you all the best,

Alan

TECHNIQUE ONE: TRIAGE

What you'll need:

Smallish Index cards of different colors (or alternately, simply a notebook)

Large tip pen

A feisty piece of your writing that you've been working on, needs taming, and especially needs to get DONE. You're over it (except you're not).

Perfectionism is a demon that visits all academic writers, as far as I can tell. Even if you think what you write sucks, and is far from perfect, and you that, no, you are not at all trying to be perfect, but merely trying to not suck so bad, I would suggest that you have perfectionist tendencies.

It's probably one of the things that is inhibiting you and keeping you in the sucky category (in your eyes, at least). And if you do have a more healthy attitude, still I bet there are strong perfectionist tendencies. They're everywhere.

If you are anything like me, letting yourself be done and moving on is not something our tendencies will allow,

and a very long period of struggle and/or avoidance can ensue. In fact, I happen to know that right now my editor is on my mailing list and is reading this and thinking, “yeah, so where’s that manuscript you promised me?”

Often there is some real work to be done, and also some less real work to be done. The technique that follows is a simple and easy way to sort that out so that you can keep moving. It also helps clear the way for considering the deeply important in the second part of this eBook.

So try this: declare yourself done, finished. It’s an option our perfectionist tendencies do not want to consider. But sometimes it’s best to just move on.

And one thing that helps us do that is the triage list.

In some emergency medical disasters, some patients are going to die no matter what, and if you try to save them, you are just going to kill the other patients who have a chance, because all your attention goes to hopeless cases. Patients are identified as critical, urgent, less urgent, and goners.

The triage on your writing is a similar measure, except there is no death. And in writing where we often waste the most time is with little things that are not critical.

But when you declare yourself done, immediately certain things spring into view, perhaps things you have been avoiding while fussing in the endless adjustments of the perfectionists purgatory.

When you declare yourself done, what comes to light are probably the urgent cases.

But it's time to move on. There are going to be lots of little imperfections. Let them be there. It's not going to be as bad as letting someone die, but sometimes you have to let go and experience it a few times to get this to sink in. Let the bad things be there. Go on with your life. See if it's so bad.

And for the rest—triage...

How To Do It

1. First, there are some parts that absolutely have to be fixed— like missing citations, a missing section— mostly it's missing things or things written as placeholders or left undone. Those are your priority patients. You simply cannot turn in your work without fixing these.

Write a label for each of these things and parts on one of

the color notecard (I use red). Or enter it into your notebook on the priority list. Since you are going to have either a pile of notecards or a list, I do want to put in an advertising plug for...

Notecards!

Nothing's notier.

They're the notiest!

Or rather, it feels real good to have tasks contained on rectangular objects and then pick them up and carry them physically over to the done pile. I realize checklists are also a pleasure. But with notecards you can have the mental pleasure of checking things off plus all this physical reinforcement. It creates even more positive feeling of momentum because it's more sensual and employs broader physical movements.

Stone tablets would be even better (actually slate and chalk is a distinct possibility— let me know if you try that).

Now a second, special targeted advertisement for some of you:

If you are stuck and confused in your writing AND ALSO are the kind of person that almost never leaves their laptop or screen device— all your notes, all your writings, even most of your readings, is all on screen, and your first

impulse is to make a checklist of things to do on your computer, as well as make plans and sketches on your computer, and you feel resistant about going into the analog world to do this... listen up! Head straight into this resistance and start getting physical and sensual with your writing process. Since it hasn't been working out so far, try something different.

OK, commercial breaks are over.

So, you've got these priority cards written out and these go on the top of your pile. You can shuffle them into a rough order from easiest to knock off on the top, to more work on the bottom. But this won't mean you have to approach them in that order, though it might be preferred.

2. Next comes the mid-level priority card color. By the way, we use smallish cards and largish pen tips to label these cards. Because you are using smallish cards and largish pens, you can't fill it up with tons of abstract and complicated instructions. You're forced to come up with concise labels, distinct tasks.

You can pencil in some small optional notes and ideas you have as you go along, but make sure the distinct task is featured.

So make this second stack with tasks that would be good to accomplish, that would make you nervous to not complete, but which would be an adventure and experiment to try not doing. Then shuffle them roughly from easy to more involved, and place under the first stack.

3. Then, make a stack for the ideal world fantasy card color. What things would you like to accomplish in your piece that are not absolutely necessary like the first pile color, and not useful like the second, but would be nice to have accomplished? Identify those parts that need such a fixing. It's quite possible that these parts do not actually exist as text yet, but it would be nice if they did. Or they represent problems that are not serious or urgent.

Again shuffle these from easiest on the top to most involved on the bottom, if that makes any sense, and place this stack on the bottom of the entire pile.

So there you have it. Your path to being done all in one nice organized pile.

Then day by day, a little at a time, you go through the urgent pile, and on down the line.

After you are out of the urgent zone, your work is

finished. You could turn it in. But maybe you want to forge on if you have time.

So, it might not be perfect. It might still be flawed. But now you can move on. To the next chapter, the next article, or whatever it is. It's important to feel like you are moving on. You can also come back some time in the future and redo this process or get into the wish list cards.

One vexing thing about writing is that inspiration can sometimes not last as long as the process of bringing it into fruition. When there is so much left to do, and inspiration is waning, it's hard. But often times the million things left to do are not as confusing or urgent as they seem—they are just all blurred together into one massive monster of a mess looming over us. When you get it sorted out a bit, it's doable, one step at a time.

Our brain can hold all the flaws and unfinished business in a mix of conscious and unconscious awareness, but this is not a skillful way to hold it. It weighs over you while you are writing. Far better is to externalize it, and then the whole mixed mess of troubles are systemized and doable as a known series of steps.

This will lend more structure to the 5 minutes daily beats, because obviously whatever card you are on is what

the beats will be about.

And it is also something that you can work with in accordance with your natural rhythms and circumstances. One of Henry Miller's 11 Commandments for Writing is apt here:

“When you can't *create* you can *work*.”

Creative juices not flowing? Pick up a red card and insert those citations, or whatever.

Feeling stuck in a section, chapter, or project that you have no more passion for?

Declare it done.

Move on.

Triage it and move on.

The feeling of advancement, by whatever means, fuels your writerly output. Try it and see. And if your passion and interests are calling you elsewhere, the triage is what can free you to go there.

Which you by all means should do. And which is the subject of the next “technique.”

TECHNIQUE TWO: WRITE ONLY GOOD PARTS

Now I know I promised in the last eBook that I would continue the productivity tip that boosts the effect of the 5 minutes of daily planning and doubles your daily word count. It has something to do with the deeper fuel that the writer's lamp is burning with.

So, one thing you will notice if you have tried the notecard triage, is there may be some strange things going on in the wish-list pile, or it's running through all the piles, and that thing is:

You feel strangely drawn to certain of the cards, in a certain way.

Like, you really feel you want to do things on the wish list, or somewhere else. Maybe these things are things you first thought of when you started writing the piece.

Maybe they are the things that first drew you to your project. Maybe they represent your deeper interests, or get you excited in some way.

Yet, they are not up there at the top of the stack.

There's a disconnect, and I urge you to reflect on that.

Now, you don't need to do the notecard triage to get my point.

But at some point, preferably right now (and I mean

really: right now) you are going to have to confront
perform some version of the “trick” I am about to impart.
Every successful writer has done it in one form or another.

You are going to have to ask yourself: what do you really
want?

I recommend you think back to moments in your life,
like the time you decided to go to grad school, the time you
settled on your project, how you conceived of your article,
book, or dissertation.

What was it that sparked your interest?

What did you see? What was the idea that first excited
you? What material did you want to cover because it would
be interesting to you?

And right now, are there any parts that you can't wait to
get to, after you finish writing this or that other part? Are
there special parts to your project, existing, or just as
likely, not existing, that are the parts you really want to
write, and to read to yourself, and have others read?

Now what if...

What if your writing could be made up of only the good
parts?

What if every day when you sat down to do your 5
minutes of daily beats, every single one of those beats were

what you really wanted to write?

The mind may throw up all kinds of resistance, like what you want is not what is required, what other people want, or what your colleagues or advisors said you should do. There are an endless supply of limiting thoughts, but let's just play pretend for now, and lay all these off to the side. You can go back and pick them up later.

So just leave that aside for now, and go with the what if... just to see what comes up.

What do you really want to write?

“The minute you choose to do what you really want to do, it becomes a different kind of life.”

Buckminster Fuller

So, what if you only wrote the good parts, the ones that flash in your mind when you think about your project excitedly (or did, when you used to be excited about it).

I see, time and time again, people struggling against themselves because they are not following their deepest desires, but are instead charting their course through fear.

I have done it myself, for too long! What a waste.

“Everyday we slaughter our finest impulses. That is why we get a heartache when we read those lines written by the hand of a master and recognize them as our own, as the tender shoots which we stifled because we lacked the faith to believe in our own powers, our own criterion of truth and beauty.”

-- Henry Miller

Write the book you would most like to read yourself. The book that you wished existed. That you would snatch off the internet, one-day shipping, and then rip the package up and go lie down and crack it open. What would that book look like? What would the pages look like? What would be in it?

Now write that book, or article. Of course, what you write may fall short. In fact, it inevitably will.

But at least you took aim in the right direction, and that is in the direction of your passions and interests. And these passions and interests are what is going to fuel your writing and take your productivity to a new level.

And before we go back and pick up all those fears, objections and limits we are so strangely fond of, let's remind ourselves of something we already know, but don't

think about enough:

If you are enjoying what you are writing, so is your reader. And if you are slogging through resistance, so is your reader.

Thing is, you may have to write something but your reader does not have to read it. Why would they want to slog through joyless prose if they didn't have to? And if you are writing stuff you don't want to write because you feel you have to, is it going to work? Are you going to be successful with that "strategy?"

If you want to be read, get published, then you need to be writing "the good parts" the whole time. I know if you are a grad student it is possible, but not likely, that certain things are non-negotiable (they are invariably fudgeworthy though). But quite an unexpected lot of what we think about all that turns out to be: not true. We just believe it. Pretty much for Post-docs on, there are only limiting beliefs, not limiting truths.

If you consistently apply your daily writing beats to the parts of your work that you really want to write, the ease of your flow, will, sooner or later, begin to show itself. And then you can follow that, and find your way.

And readers will find your way to you.

This point I cannot emphasize enough. This is probably “the deal breaker” for Academic Muse. If you are not willing to try to put aside some fear, concerns, and limiting beliefs and follow your finer impulses, then we are on a different page and Academic Muse is not for you. I am not saying it is always easy. For instance how do you abandon a limiting belief? If you believe it, it’s not a belief. It’s true!

Well, exposure and immersion to other attitudes and values helps. It loosens things up.

Being with other like-minded people (or should I say different minded?) helps.

But you can loosen it up right now all by yourself. For instance, by reflecting on your original passions and on what “the good parts” are. These are not what the mind habitually goes to for most people—it’s to concerns, worries, doubts, fears—in short: danger.

You can put your triage stack off to the side and work on it regularly. Danger taken care of. And then you are much more free to contemplate what you are going to write. Choose wisely, which is to follow your passion.

Despite what our limiting beliefs tell us, choosing this is not the dangerous path in today’s academia. It may *feel* risky, but that does not mean it actually *is* more risky than

following the formula and templates for “what you are supposed to do” based on what everyone else is doing.

Because...

If you write like everyone else, then you have a lot of competition.

FINDING YOUR WAY OF WRITING

Now a few things besides limiting beliefs and a messy monster of imperfections are in the way. The two techniques above can clear things up a bit. But still, you have to actually find how you are going to walk along the way that is cleared out.

The beliefs, for instance, may be mixed in with a lot of valid desires to improve one’s prose style and sense of form. And the monster of messy imperfections may include the fact that the manuscript is, in some part, actually a big mess with no solution in sight.

But at least with the daily 5 minute beat sheet, the triage stack of cards, and your own contemplation and determination to make your writing only the good parts, you are off to a great start. So stay tuned for the next

eBooks which will cover techniques for how to get out of a big hot mess, and for improving prose style and sense of form.

Maybe I should follow my own advice, because I suddenly realize that for me, these are the good parts!

For More on Implementing
all this and to finish your dissertation,
article, grant proposal, or book, join the
creative academic writing bootcamp.

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About the Author:

Alan Klima is Professor of Anthropology at University of California, Davis, and the author of *The Funeral Casino*, *Ghosts and Numbers*, and the soon to come *Ethnography #9*, to be published with a director's cut of the film *Ghosts and Numbers*.