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INTRODUCTION

Writing with Pleasure

Better go down upon your marrow-bones
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is to work harder than all these, and yet
Be thought an idler by the noisy set
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
The martyrs call the world.

—W. B. Yeats, “Adam’s Curse”

“Well, it’s better than *Writing with Pain*,” commented my editor when I first told him the title of my book-in-progress.

Indeed. And yet, for many people, the phrase *writing with pleasure* has an oxymoronic ring: *writing* signals hard work and puritanical virtue, while *pleasure* drips with hedonistic vice. In a tradition that stretches back through Western culture at least to the time of Socrates, academic and professional writers have been taught to privilege intellect over emotion, logos over pathos, and the life of the mind over the sentiments of the heart. No wonder we, like Yeats, tend to characterize our writing process as an agonizing chore rather than an enjoyable craft: “I’ve got to clear a whole stack of emails” (writing as laundry pile); “I’ve got to bash my way through this paper” (writing as sledgehammer); “I’ve got to crank out this report by Monday” (writing as sausage machine). We’re supposed to be producing worthy written outputs—reports, assignments, articles, books—not prancing around enjoying ourselves.

This book has an audacious aim: to recuperate pleasure as a legitimate, indeed crucial, writing-related emotion. My

intended audience includes not only academic writers but also journalists, lawyers, business writers, editors, novelists, memoirists, poets, bloggers, tweeters, and anyone else who writes regularly, whether for an employer or a deadline or a cause. Rather than dwelling on the well-worn topic of writing with pain, I have assembled a multifaceted mosaic of research-based strategies, a colorful kaleidoscope of ideas, to help you locate, incubate, and amplify pleasure in your own writing practice.

Yes, yes, I can hear the outcries already. By focusing mainly on pleasurable writing, I am ignoring the very real pain and distress experienced by many writers, from beleaguered students to overworked academics caught up in the relentless publication pressures of the modern neoliberal university. Urging exhausted, dispirited knowledge workers to enjoy their work is akin to feeding them *soma*, the feel-good narcotic featured in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, or to marketing a new line of snake oil. Only by challenging the conditions under which unpleasurable writing takes place can we truly hope to turn the tide.

Let me be clear: This book is not intended as a guide to whitewashing negative emotions or to brainwashing disaffected writers into thinking that they're happy when in fact their lives are miserable. It's not a celebration of mindless labor performed cheerfully for the benefit of rapacious managers or slave-driving supervisors; nor can I promise all writers a life of giddy joy, unshadowed by the human complexities of frustration or anxiety. In the context of this book, *writing* means putting words together well, and *pleasure* means finding meaning and satisfaction in that process—even when the conditions for writing are far from ideal. For most writers I know, that sounds like a pretty appealing combination.

I love the fact that *Writing with Pleasure* is being published by Princeton University Press as part of their Skills

for Scholars series. Cultivating pleasure in writing is, I believe, an essential scholarly skill: not just a survival skill but a creative skill, a human skill. Intuition and common sense already tell us that writers who strike the keys with joy are more likely to be prolific authors, engaging communicators, and skillful wordsmiths (not to mention happier people overall) than those who struggle to get words onto the page. Organizational psychologist Shawn Achor provides an evolutionary explanation for this correlation, backed up with neurological evidence:

Happiness gives us a real chemical edge on the competition. How? Positive emotions flood our brains with dopamine and serotonin, chemicals that not only make us feel good, but dial up the learning centers of our brains to higher levels. They help us organize new information, keep that information in the brain longer, and retrieve it faster later on. [They also help us] think more quickly and creatively, become more skilled at complex analysis and problem solving, and see and invent new ways of doing things.

Positivity and productivity, it turns out, are bedfellows, not enemies—and writing with pleasure really is better than writing with pain.

WHY PLEASURE?

For the life of me I cannot recall a time I enjoyed writing. (Quinn, PhD student in environmental science, New Zealand)

I don't think I've ever associated writing with pleasure. (Katherine, institutional researcher, North Carolina)

I cannot think of a time when writing has ever been pleasurable. Never! Even writing these few sentences is tortuous! (Colleen, PhD student in film studies, New Jersey)

For the life of me I cannot recall a time when I did not enjoy writing. I don't think I've ever not associated writing with pleasure. And even at times when my writing has felt tortuously slow—it's no accident that the words *tortuous* and *tortoise* are related—I have always found some measure of joy and satisfaction in the challenge of the writer's craft. Over the years, however, I have come to see myself as something of a freak, like that weird kid in my first-grade class who liked to eat bugs. Serious writers, after all, are supposed to hate writing:

Writing about research isn't fun. Writing is frustrating, complicated, and un-fun. (Paul J. Silvia, *How to Write a Lot*)

Words . . . are but crude hieroglyphs chiseled in pain and sorrow to commemorate an event which is untransmissible. (Henry Miller, *Sexus*)

As for writing with pleasure: Forget about it. In the self-help section of your local bookstore, you'll find a long run of books on *happiness* as well as bestsellers extolling the benefits of *bliss*, *joy*, *flourishing*, and *flow*. Books devoted to a meaningful cultivation of *pleasure*, however, remain thin on the ground—due in part, I suspect, to the long shadow of Sigmund Freud, for whom the *pleasure principle* (*Lustprinzip*) signified the id-driven immaturity of a hungry child or lust-addled adult. Even in the burgeoning field of positive psychology, *pleasure* remains a suspect concept, associated by positivity expert Martin Seligman not with intellectual activity or lasting contentment so much as with the instant gratification afforded by sensory experiences such as eating, dancing, or sex:

The pleasures are delights that have clear sensory and strong emotional components, what philosophers call “raw feels”: ecstasy, thrills . . . delight, mirth, exuberance, and comfort. They are evanescent, and they involve little, if any, thinking.

Old prejudices die hard; an editor at a prestigious university press once warned me that their marketing and communications department would never approve a book title with the word *pleasure* in it, as librarians and booksellers might get the wrong idea and shelve my respectable academic tome in the “adults only” section.

Little wonder, then, that scholarly books on disciplinary writing conventions pay scant attention to pleasure and that positive emotions barely even rate a mention in most self-help literature aimed at academic and professional writers. In a taxonomic analysis of ninety recently published academic writing guides, my co-authors and I found that only around 3 percent of their page content mentions the emotional dimensions of academic writing at all, while only 150 pages out of 23,495—barely 0.6 percent of their total page count excluding front and back matter—explicitly address the value of cultivating positive emotions about scholarly writing. Of the three books on writing in our study that contain the word *pleasure* in their titles, one focuses mainly on creative writing, one on essay writing, and one on writing pedagogy. Roland Barthes’s poststructuralist classic *Le Plaisir du Texte* (*The Pleasure of the Text*), meanwhile, is mainly a philosophy of reading rather than a treatise on pleasurable writing.

But I didn’t choose pleasure; pleasure chose me. As part of my research for an earlier book, called *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write*, I had asked more than twelve hundred faculty and graduate students from across the sciences, social sciences, and humanities to list the main emotions that they associate with their academic

writing. Their most frequently named emotion word was *frustration*, followed by *anxiety*—a fairly unsurprising result for anyone who has spent much time around PhD students and research academics. Yet, when I asked that same question in my interviews with one hundred “successful academics” who had been recommended to me by their peers as especially stylish, prolific, and/or confident writers, a very different picture emerged: for them, the words *pleasure* and *enjoyment* topped the table. Many of the successful writers I talked with assured me that they write not just because they *have* to but because they *want* to. Pleasure is the secret sauce that flavors their writing practice, the magic tincture that turns base metal into gold.

Scholarly writers are always on the lookout for research gaps, those narrow chinks in the fortress of an idea that invite us to peek through and find out what’s on the other side. This one—a yawning chasm between the enjoyment expressed by successful academic writers and the paucity of scholarly literature on pleasurable writing—felt large enough to drive a bus through. I tried out various approaches to the topic, plotting prospective books with titles such as *Productivity and Pleasure* (hence my conversation with that risk-averse editor) or *Why Write?* (but Mark Edmundson had got there before me). One day, as I was walking through the park on my way to work, I experienced a sudden flash of insight—not a lightning bolt, exactly; more like that moment in the opening credits of a movie when the pages of a book are ruffled by the wind and fall open to the title page. I stopped in my tracks: “I need to write a book called *Writing with Pleasure*.”

Writing with Pleasure! I like the not-so-distant echo of Peter Elbow’s classic *Writing with Power*, which revolutionized the field of writing pedagogy by urging teachers to shift their emphasis away from writing as a set of unpalatable rules to writing as a form of empowerment and enjoyment—

from “Eat your vegetables” to “Harvest, cook, savor!” There is pleasure in power and power in pleasure, to be sure. Yet *Writing with Pleasure* suggests a very different emotional orientation than *Writing with Power*: less muscle, more fun.

So where, when, and how, I wondered, do academic and professional writers find pleasure in writing? Within months after that lightbulb moment in the park, I had designed a research questionnaire, secured ethics consent, obtained a small pot of funding, and set out to find answers to those questions. Over the next two and a half years, I facilitated dozens of “Writing with Pleasure” workshops—sometimes sneakily titled “Stylish Academic Writing” or “How Successful Academics Write”—for faculty and graduate students at universities and conferences in twelve countries, closing off my data collection just before the COVID-19 pandemic brought international travel to a halt. During that period, I gathered 590 handwritten narratives of pleasurable writing, which I subsequently mined for stories, metaphors, and insights. With the help of several assiduous research assistants, I also pulled together a formidable bibliography of books and articles on productivity, positivity, creativity, and the writing process. These resources, in turn, allowed me to triangulate my findings with those of researchers in disciplines ranging from philosophy to psychology and from dance studies to neuroscience.

For practical and logistical reasons, I collected most of my data in academic contexts: for example, at faculty development workshops, graduate student symposia, and scholarly conferences. As a result, all but a handful of the narratives of pleasure cited in this book were contributed by academic writers: a mix of graduate students (36%), faculty or postdoctoral research fellows (55%), and university employees in other writing-related roles (8%). The topic of this book resonates far beyond academia, however, as do its key messages. Over the years, I have worked as a workshop

facilitator, writing coach, and consultant not only with academic writers from across the disciplines but also with lawyers, judges, government policy advisers, copyeditors, museum curators, poets, visual artists, professional historians, and romance novelists. While the writing styles of these various cohorts differ widely, the human questions that they bring to the task of writing are, for the most part, strikingly similar: Why do I find writing so hard? Am I the only one who feels this way? How can I recover the love of writing that I felt as a child?

NARRATIVES OF PLEASURE

Writing has always been a source of pleasure in my life. (Christina, PhD student in political science, Colorado)

I find writing extremely enjoyable—a release from other everyday pressures. (Philip, lecturer in hospitality management, United Kingdom)

I love writing about science. New ideas, new schedules, new experiments! Sharing science with people is amazing! Writing is the most powerful tool to express myself, because I can create worlds with my words. (Paraskevi, PhD student in molecular biology, Austria)

Around twenty faculty members and graduate students turned up for my very first “Writing with Pleasure” workshop, which I offered as part of an all-day writing symposium organized by a colleague at Teesside University in Yorkshire. As I distributed my research questionnaire, I invited the workshop participants to close their eyes and recall a time in their lives when they associated *writing* with *pleasure*. Next, I asked them to freewrite for ten minutes—that is,

to write by hand without stopping—and describe the scene as vividly as they could: When and where did that writing take place? What kind of writing were they doing, and why? What writing tools were they using? What sensory details could they remember? Were other people involved in their writing process? Why did the experience give them pleasure?

As they picked up their pens and started writing, I began to fret. Would they find the exercise frivolous, invasive, a waste of their precious time? And even if they did take the task seriously, would their responses be interesting and varied enough to help other writers find new paths to pleasure? I need not have worried on either count. When I read through the handwritten narratives in my hotel room that evening, two in particular caught my eye; I quote them here in full to convey a sense of their length, tone, and texture. The first was written by Lis, a midcareer psychologist:

The best writing experience I can recall is quite recent. I went to Scotland with my two best friends, who are both quite senior researchers and very skilled writers. We'd rented a cottage right next to the seafront in a small fishing village. We had agreed on a very extensive, strict writing schedule, however, in reality we did not stick to it rigorously. Going out allowed us to stretch our legs, get fresh air, and "blow the cobwebs" from the brain, creating space for new ideas, or getting us past an impasse, which temporarily blocked the writing. When we were writing we were all sitting at the dining table with each our laptop. We respected each other's need to concentrate, however, we nevertheless consulted with each other from time to time, using each other's strengths or just sounding out a problem and getting suggestions and ideas. This would give confidence, inspire ideas and help shape the writing. It was a pleasure to have access to help

as well as being able to support others in their writing endeavour. (Lis, senior lecturer in counseling psychology, United Kingdom)

The second was contributed by Mark, a graduate student in criminology:

When I was about 8 years old, I started a project mounting wildflowers into a book and writing about them underneath, just a short vignette about their appearance, where they grow and perhaps something about their properties. I specifically remember the scent and the process of picking them from gardens and a local quarry. I came to associate these scents with the knowledge and finding out about them—the curiosity and journey that it prompted was more important than the finished project; in fact I don't think I ever finished it! This was before the time of Google and Internet resources so my journey took me into spaces that would not be necessary in today's information medium of immediate satisfaction—you had to go places! The public library, the school library, maybe an old bookshop—I loved the smell of old books and their stuffy yet somehow comforting language that conjured images of an old naturalist or butterfly collector with his net. I often tried to mimic the beautiful calligraphy in these books, though with limited success. (Mark, PhD student in criminology, United Kingdom)

On the face of it, these two narratives could hardly be more different. Lis recounts a recent adult experience, whereas Mark recalls a long-ago event from childhood; Lis typed on her laptop, whereas Mark penned his flower book by hand; Lis wrote in the company of her colleagues, whereas Mark worked mostly in solitude; Lis focused on an academic

article that she hoped would advance her scholarly career, while Mark's creative project was purely self-motivated. Yet their stories share a number of common themes that I would observe again and again in the narratives of pleasure that I collected from academic writers around the world. For example, both Lis and Mark wrote as solo authors but benefited from the wisdom of others. Both moved back and forth between the natural world and intimate interior settings. Most tellingly of all, both derived enormous pleasure from ambitious writing projects that other people might well have described as hard work.

I had originally planned to collect around 200 narratives of pleasure; but, like Mark, I found myself drawn forward by my own pleasure in the journey, a figurative butterfly net in my hand. By the time I finally stopped, with 590 ethics-approved questionnaires in the bag, I had gathered more anecdotes, vignettes, and insights than I could possibly pack into a single book, as well as some useful quantitative data. Overall, I learned that most of the academic writers in my survey sample had at some point in their lives experienced pleasurable writing; that pleasurable writing knows no demographic or disciplinary borders; and that pleasurable writing can occur at any age. (A brief overview of my research methodology and participant demographics can be found in the research notes at the back of the book.)

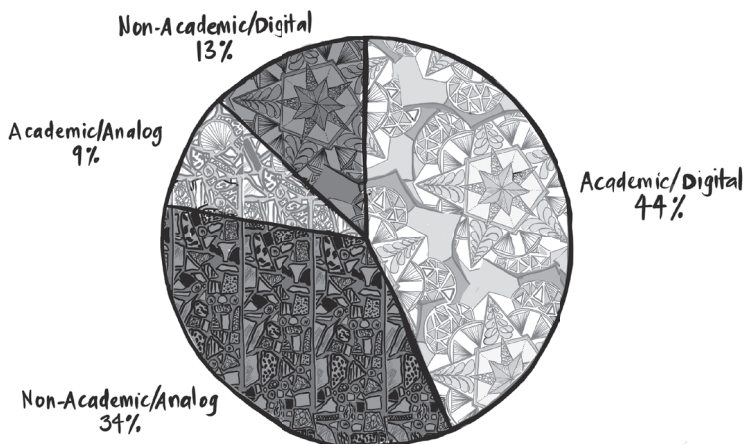
Fortunately, the three pleasure-deprived writers whose narratives I quoted earlier in this introduction (Quinn, Katherine, and Colleen) turned out to be outliers, representing fewer than 2 percent of respondents overall. I say "fortunately" because any academic or professional researcher who truly hates writing, with no glimmer of light on the horizon, is likely to have a long, unhappy career path ahead of them—unless, of course, they read this book and find their way onto a better road.

THE COLORS OF PLEASURE

In high school, most of my writing was in pen, on lined paper in a spiral-bound notebook. I still like those for journaling (and I own too many fountain pens), and I have embraced the aimlessness of my journal-writing and accepted that I mainly do it for the physical pleasure of putting anything on a page. For academic writing I still type on a computer, though, because my thoughts tend to jump around and I need to slot them into the right place in my outline before I forget them. (Anna, master's student in linguistics, Germany)

Two questions intrigued me from the moment I began to design my research questionnaire. First, would the academic writers in my study choose to write about pleasurable experiences involving *academic writing*, such as school assignments, doctoral theses, and peer-reviewed research publications, or would they mostly describe writing in *non-academic* genres such as fiction writing, poetry, letter writing, journaling, and blogging? Second, would their narratives of pleasure mainly feature *digital* tools such as computers, tablets, and phones, or would they favor *analog* tools such as pens, paper, and whiteboards?

As it turned out, I might just as well have stopped my data collection with Lis (*academic, digital*) and Mark (*non-academic, analog*). Upon being asked to recall a time in their lives when writing gave them pleasure, exactly 50 percent of my respondents wrote about experiences involving academic writing alone, while the other 50 percent chose situations involving non-academic, mixed, or multiple writing genres. As for their choice of writing devices, roughly equal percentages of respondents reported having used either digital tools or analog tools exclusively (40% each), while the remaining 20 percent employed both types of tools, whether serially or simultaneously.



Writing Types and Tools

When I merged these two sets of results, I found a significant correlation between digital tools and academic writing and between analog tools and non-academic writing (see “Writing Types and Tools”). Put another way, the writers who wrote about pleasurable experiences involving *non-academic writing* were roughly 2.6 times more likely to have used *analog, mixed, or hybrid* tools than digital tools alone, while those who wrote about pleasurable experiences involving *academic writing* were nearly five times more likely to have used *digital, mixed, or hybrid* tools than analog tools exclusively. Mark filled his notebook with hand-drawn calligraphy and pressed flowers; Lis typed her scholarly article on her laptop.

These findings suggest that some writing tools may be better suited than others, not only for specific kinds of *writing*, but also for specific kinds of *writing-related pleasure*. When I touch-type on my computer keyboard, the pleasure that I feel is almost purely intellectual; my physical surroundings seem to fade away as my fingers surrender to the flow of ideas. When I write by hand in a notebook, by contrast, my pleasure becomes more intensely embodied; my heartbeat slows along with the pace of my pen, and months or years

afterward I find that I can still recall physical details such as the chair I sat in while I was writing a particular passage, the weight and size of the notebook in my hand, even the temperature of the air and the quality of the light. To label the pleasures of academic/digital writing *intellectual* and *cerebral* and the pleasures of non-academic/analog writing *embodied* and *creative* would be overly reductive: all thinking is creative, after all, and all creativity involves both the body and the mind. Nonetheless, my research for this book has inspired me to become more adventurous in my own writing processes and more strategic in my choice of specific writing tools to stimulate specific topics, rhythms, and moods.

But I suppose I must have already known that analog tools help writers think differently. How else can I explain why I brought along colored pencils to that first “Writing with Pleasure” workshop in Yorkshire? If I worried about how a group of faculty members and PhD students would respond to the first half of the workshop—freewriting, pleasure, emotions, oh my!—that concern paled in comparison to my anxiety about the second half, when I asked them to draw a color-coded action plan for bringing more pleasure and enjoyment into their writing lives.

The SPACE acronym had emerged quite early on in my research process as a catchy mnemonic for the social, *physical*, *aesthetic*, *creative*, and *emotional* dimensions of writing, all of which I associated with pleasure in writing. I read out the following instructions, set a timer for ten minutes, and waited to see what would happen:

Draw the SPACE of pleasure as a five-pointed star, a pentagon, or any other five-pointed figure. Using a different color for each of the five elements, map out a strategy for making your writing practice more:

- ★ Socially balanced
- ★ Physically engaged

- ★ Aesthetically nourishing
- ★ Creatively challenging
- ★ Emotionally uplifting

Once again, to my relief, the participants dove into the activity with gusto, producing a startling variety of SPACE maps beyond the five-pointed stars and pentagons that I had recommended (although there were plenty of those as well). Jessica, a PhD student in creative writing, drew five brightly colored tulips, each labeled with a different aspiration: for example, “writing retreats, workshops, new PhD network” (social); “exercise as reward, exercise as motivation, walk with a topic or question in mind” (physical); “giant mind map post-its; colour-coding each chapter as a metaphor” (aesthetic). Rob, a senior lecturer in English, sketched a bird’s-eye view of his back garden divided into five distinctive areas corresponding to the five elements of the SPACE rubric: a patio for social interaction, a play area for physical activity, and so forth. Evija, a postdoctoral researcher in writing studies, drew an aerial view of two pairs of dancing shoes—a man’s chunky brogues facing a woman’s fine stilettos—and labeled her diagram “The Embrace” in reference to her passion for tango dancing. “Tango has all the SPACE elements,” Evija noted in the margin of her worksheet; “How can I bring them into my (unpleasurable) writing?”

At subsequent Writing with Pleasure workshops elsewhere in the world, this initial assortment of SPACE images would grow to include drawings of fruits, trees, houses, landscapes, playgrounds, mountains, beaches, offices, people, animals, and more. Daniel, a New Jersey historian, sketched a color-coded tombstone to represent his research on the history of death; Anne, a public health researcher in Australia, depicted herself as a pied piper attracting enthusiastic collaborators; Antonio, an Italian astrophysicist, drew a space-walking astronaut besieged by aliens who badger him about

his writing deadlines: “I should definitely go back to the spaceship!” he concludes. (A curated selection of these images is displayed in an online SPACE Gallery where you can browse the artwork by category and even submit a sketch of your own ideal SPACE of Writing.)

That first workshop in Yorkshire affirmed for me several core beliefs that have shaped the structure and ethos of this book. First, it reassured me that a book called *Writing with Pleasure* would find an eager readership among academic and professional writers who hunger for more pleasure, playfulness, and color in their working lives. Second, it reminded me that creative exercises nearly always yield creative results, a message that I have since carried into other aspects of my academic work: not just my research and teaching but my service and leadership as well. Third, the workshop confirmed for me the value of arts-based methodologies that call on techniques such as poetry, storytelling, visual imagery, and metaphor to help writers access the deepest recesses of their minds and emotions—a validation of creative risk taking that has emboldened me to fill this book with poetry, storytelling, visual imagery, and metaphor. Alive to pleasure, the arts help us celebrate the pleasures of being alive.

PLEASURE PROMPT 2: A Time in Your Life . . .

Recall a time in your life when you have associated *writing with pleasure*. No need to overthink this exercise! The very first memory of pleasurable writing that comes to mind is almost certainly your best choice. Set a timer for ten minutes and spend that time *freewriting*: that is, writing freely and fluidly by hand, without stopping to plan or edit. Describe the scene and circumstances in as much detail as you can. For example:

- ★ When and where did the writing take place?
- ★ What kind of writing were you doing, and why?
- ★ What writing tools were you using?
- ★ What sensory details can you remember: sights, sounds, textures, tastes, smells?
- ★ Were other people involved in your writing process—for example, as collaborators, as potential readers, as subject matter?
- ★ Why did this experience give you pleasure?

You can return to this prompt to chronicle further memories of pleasurable writing whenever you need an emotional pick-me-up. To expand your repertoire of pleasure, try varying the time frames, locations, genres, tools, and people involved in the scenarios that you write about, so that each new narrative explores a different dimension of writing with pleasure.

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