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Twitter Women's Tips on Academic Writing: A Female Response to Gioia's Rules of the Game

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Editor's Introduction

I am apparently a public victim of my own private biases. I'm a guy, you see, and guys have a set of hidden biases about . . . well . . . almost everything. I thought I had written a more-or-less "universal" set of experience-derived rules for improving young scholars' chances of getting their work published (Gioia, 2019). But, apparently my presumed universalist rules carry the heavy hand of guyness. If you are a woman, and read those rules, you might well conclude that only a guy, responding to a guy-construction of a publishing world that is ostensibly adversarial and competitive, would have written *those* rules and written them *that* way. That appears to be what has happened in the wake of "Gioia's Rules of the Game," published in this section of *Journal of Management Inquiry* within the past year. Or, maybe those rules are a subtle consequence of a guy being influenced by the history of male influence on the publishing process, so the tendency is to turn everything into a competition. Whatever the reason, the fact is that my well-intended little essay generated a Twitter-storm response from female scholars. Trish Greenhalgh served as instigator and point-person for assembling a putatively more gender-neutral set of suggestions for helping *all* scholars to publish their work. What follows, then, is not just a rejoinder to but also a supplement to, a partial reframing of, and an embellishment of some suggestions for improving the odds of you getting your work published.

Abstract

This article, intended in a spirit of good humor, offers a critique of a paper by Gioia on how to get published. Based on a social media discussion to which 46 women academics from around the world contributed, we ask whether the recommendations in Gioia's original paper are based on gendered assumptions and stereotypes (the "lone wolf" male academic competing with colleagues for a slot in a prestigious journal). Drawing on feminist scholars such as Mary Wollstonecraft ("Virtue can only flourish among equals"), we offer some additional recommendations which emphasize the importance of reflection, collaboration, acceptance of ambiguity, attention to audience and context, and nurturing self and others.

Keywords

publishing, rules, gender

This article draws on posts by 46 women academics whose Twitter handles are listed at the end of this article.

Women academics read with interest Denny Gioia's (2019) short manifesto on how to get published in academia, which was recommended to us by a male professor on social media. It sparked something of a feminist Twitterstorm.

After citing background inspiration from two men (Isaac Newton and Pablo Picasso), Gioia offers 18 suggestions for success in publishing. One source is apocryphal ("*Publish or perish!*"). Ten are from men who inspired the author (with maxims such as, "*Always have options*"; "*More shots on goal means more goals*"; "*Don't take no for an answer*"). Six are from the author himself, including "*The academic world can be divided into knowledge generators and knowledge disseminators. Better to be a knowledge generator*." His final suggestion is a corporate advertising slogan from Nike ("*Just do it*").

Gioia's article includes some useful recommendations, but we were struck by the apparent discursive assumption underlying the piece. Did we imagine it, or did the tips assume a lone (male) pioneer pursuing a well-laid-out, linear path to the final publication, competing with fellow wolves for prestigious journal slots and wrestling manfully with adversarial editors and reviewers?

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We women academics put down our knitting needles and came up with some additional ideas—many of them rooted in our shared female academic experience. For initial inspiration, we looked to Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), who said "*Virtue can only flourish among equals*" (Wollstonecraft, 1790).

Below, we offer 18 alternative suggestions. Although some of these suggestions might stem from attributes more traditionally associated with women, they might better be considered as essentially gender-neutral. Taken together with Gioia's rules, they offer a more balanced approach to successfully navigating the often-arcane publishing process, although they might resonate differently with different scholars.[1]

1. Find your time to write and your place to write

Write regularly. Find a quiet place (*your* place) and shut the door. If you don't have the luxury of large chunks of uninterrupted time (often the privilege of the tenured), just write a little every day. Make appointments in your diary for writing and keep those.

2. Be a writer

Strive to think of yourself as *someone who writes*. Even better, strive to be someone other people want to write with (because you have something worth saying, and because you are not only committed, but supportive). Don't obsess about your h-index, the number of papers on your CV or the impact factor of the journals you're aiming for. These are surrogate metrics. Your writing self is what really matters.

3. Read others' writing

Good writers are usually avid readers. When you read, pay attention to the writing in what you're reading. Keep a file of papers you find to be elegant, beautiful and/or persuasively crafted. Return to them after you have written the first, faltering draft of your own paper. Draw on the work of others to make your own paper come alive.

4. Start small

Play for small achievements early. Write book reviews, letters, conference reports, blogs, and commentaries to get some experience of publishing before aiming for a full-length article or book. If you don't have the time to take on a major writing project because of other commitments, writing shorter pieces will help you build your confidence and get your name known.

5. Use the writing process to overcome your block

Many women and men put off writing a paper until they have more ideas, more data or more experience. Ask yourself whether the lack of these desirables really justifies the delay. Depending on your discipline and the nature of your empirical work, writing might be the very thing that *generates* the ideas, data or experience you're seeking (or just might tell you what you actually do need).

6. Envision your audience

Before you start writing, visualize your likely audience. What are the points of departure of this audience (e.g., the things they already know or assume; the framing they will use to conceptualize the issue; the things they believe cannot or should not be said)? What does your audience want or need to know about the topic? How will they interpret and use your findings? Knowing yourself might be most important . . . but knowing your audience is a close second.

7. Remember the red thread

The "red thread" is the overall narrative of what you're doing, why it matters and what you found. Keep in mind the central point of your paper and always work toward it. Consider planning the paper in advance using mind-mapping tools and techniques. Learn how to construct a strong argument—or even better, how to tell a good story. Embed your findings within that story.

8. Don't swallow the dictionary

Keep your language as simple as possible. Use shorter sentences and active verbs; avoid parochial idioms.

9. Collaborate on papers

By all means write some sole-authored papers, but recognize the value of writing with others. Work with people who really understand the issues and/or the research question—and with people who are genuinely curious rather than simply keen to get their names on a paper. Reach out to colleagues from other disciplines, respecting their perspectives and learning from your differences. Build relationships with colleagues from other countries whose contrasting experience will encourage you to re-examine your own assumptions and findings.

10. Set ground rules and agree a broad direction

In a collaborative paper, set a draft authorship agreement (who will be first, etc.) before you start, and agree to revisit it if the paper takes a different turn. Discuss and agree an approach with all co-authors. This should not be set in stone, but it will probably save you time and effort redrafting (and even reanalyzing data).

11. Don't assume that writing is linear

An academic paper typically looks linear (introduction-lit review-method-results-discussion), but research and thinking often aren't, so you will probably have to start with a meandering account and then tame it. If you have lots of ideas and findings, circulating a preliminary outline to interested colleagues may help you to sharpen the focus on what you want to say.

12. Embrace ambiguity

Some academic questions don't have a single, unambiguous answer. Learn to write about this ambiguity in a scholarly way. Try different lenses, take an offside stance, re-examine assumptions, and follow your intuition. Rather than presenting a firm position or declaring that you've found the answer, pen an article that opens up multiple interpretations or starts a conversation.

13. Share the load

If you've been leading the writing of a collaborative paper but are struggling to progress, let someone else take the lead for a while. Conversely, if the principal author seems to have run out of energy or inspiration, offer to take the lead for the next iteration.

14. Take care of yourself

Writing can be an emotional business. If you're feeling tired or vulnerable, focus on writing something you find achievable and enriching. If you're feeling strong, start writing that particular manuscript you're dreading (it may not be as tough as you think). Assume that feedback and comments, even when they come across as negative, are usually intended to help improve your paper before submission. If necessary, put them aside for a few days and return to them when you're feeling more receptive. If you're with a colleague whose work has just been rejected, take them for a walk and help talk them back to confidence.

15. It's OK to give up

Know when to give up. If your data have become obsolete, or you come to realize you don't have a strong message, don't waste any more time. Delete that millstone paper from your to-do list and focus on drafts of other papers with higher potential. Even when one paper doesn't work out, you can still learn from all that hard work.

16. Engage with context—and the real world

While there is undoubtedly a place in academia for purely theoretical contributions, there is also value in exploring and publishing about "real-world" issues. Drawing on Van de Ven and Johnson (2006), you may even wish to challenge the distinction Gioia made between "knowledge generator" (someone who does research to generate knowledge) and "knowledge disseminator" (someone who transmits knowledge to others). If so, you could seek to write not merely *for* but *with* the intended users of your research. Even if you see yourself as a "knowledge generator," bear in mind the desired impact of your research when writing it up, and highlight the translational benefits (in what way will your findings improve something in the real world?).

17. Learn and grow in groups and networks

Create a peer group or network of colleagues with whom you can speak openly about your writing fears and sense of vulnerability. Participating in writing groups builds your confidence and helps you learn to be accountable. Get used to the vulnerability of collaboration with colleagues you trust. Have "critical friends" on your team or involved in your internal review process. Offer to read and peer review other people's work. Not only does it help everyone out, but you will learn lot about your own writing from reading others' writing.

18. Build capacity in the next generation

Build long-term publishing (and research) capacity by involving juniors (MSc and PhD students, trainees and others) in the writing process. This provides them with a learning experience and builds confidence (and hopefully will inspire them to lead and pave their own way). Where possible, carve out protected time for writing together (e.g., organize a writing retreat).

Coda

Our feminist Twitterstorm was in good humor. We agree that the "lone pioneer," competitive approach to publishing is helpful in some circumstances. We therefore recommend that this article be read alongside Gioia's original piece (Gioia, 2019).

To show that we have no hard feelings toward our male colleagues, we give the last word to Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951): "*Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent*" (Wittgenstein, 1921). In other words, if you have nothing to say, there's no point in writing at all.

This article is based on contributions from the following Twitter accounts, all belonging to women academics:

@alexmartiniuk
@ana_luisa_neves
@andreawiggins
@annetteboaz

@annmroz
@brissydeb
@chrysalischris
@cygraham_graham
@DrJoMorrison1
@drsarahejackson
@drsarahjwhite
@emjhu
@gilesywagon
@glover_lshtm
@HDEMCOP
@hopeospical
@jenhock13
@julie4clahrc
@katmcphe
@kirstyledoare
@kitzingercelia
@klcampbellphd
@lcolledge1983
@liangrhea
@lizhoffmanbmc
@lmweeks
@marywestview
@merryngott
@mlanelson
@ndholliday
@nicolacullum
@parveenasamali
@pauline35205993
@peeblesellie
@phyllisillari
@profsandyoliver
@ruth_garside
@salthorne
@shivanim_kc
@sophiegoyet
@susannahfleming
@trishgreenhalgh
@ubcpulmrehabres
@vawelch
@voliveira2014

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Note

1. If we keep pushing the idea that *this* is something women do and *that* is something that men do, it not only tends to ignore the overlaps across genders but also tends to disproportionately reinforce the "hidden work" that women academics often shoulder. For that reason, although the suggestions in this article all came from female scholars' Twitter posts, they were intended to help early-career researchers of any gender.

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Wollstonecraft, M. (1790). *A vindication of the rights of men*. London, England: Printed for J. Johnson.