

BRIEFING NEWS & POLITICS ARTS LIFE BUSINESS & TECH SCIENCE PODCASTS & VIDEO BLOGS

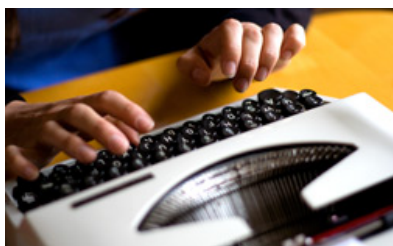
HOME / THE BROWSER : CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY.

# Slowpoke

## How to be a faster writer.

By Michael Agger

Posted Wednesday, Aug. 10, 2011, at 11:45 AM ET



Can you make yourself write quickly?

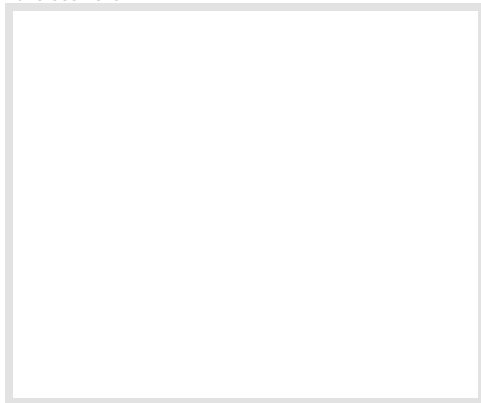
Hunched over my keyboard, I'm haunted by anecdotes of faster writers. Christopher Hitchens composing a [Slate column in 20 minutes](#)—after a chemo session, after a "full" dinner party, late on a Sunday night. The infamously productive Trollope, who used customized paper! "He had a note pad that had been indexed to indicate intervals of 250 words," William F. Buckley [told the Paris Review](#). "He would force himself to write 250 words per 15 minutes. Now, if at the end of 15 minutes he hadn't reached one of those little marks on his page, he would write faster." Buckley himself was a legend of speed—writing a complete book review in crosstown cabs and the like.

I remember, too, a former colleague who was blazingly fast. We would be joking at lunch—"Imagine if David Foster Wallace had written a children's book"—and there it would be in my inbox, 15 minutes later. Not a perfect draft, but publish-it-on-your-blog good. He could sit down at the keyboard and toss off Chopin or Ragtime, while I was banging away at Chopsticks and making lots of mistakes. Dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-du-dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-du-dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-DAH!

It's no secret that writing is hard ... but why can't I be one of those special few for whom it comes easily? What am I doing wrong? Why haven't I gotten any faster?

Like	48
3	
PRINT	
DISCUSS	
E-MAIL	
RSS	
RECOMMEND...	
REPRINTS	
SINGLE PAGE	

Advertisement



In search of the secret of quickness, I started with a Malcolm Gladwell passage that's always piqued me. In [Outliers](#), he discusses the now famous 10,000-hour rule—the amount of time it takes to achieve true mastery—and quotes the neurologist Daniel Levitin: "In study after study, of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice skaters, concern pianists, chess players, master criminals, and what have you, this number comes up again and again." Fiction writers? Really?

Had MFA students been sent to a lab and force-fed scones while they typed on their laptops? Or had some intrepid grad student done field research in the Starbucks of the Eastern seaboard? Alas, nothing so interesting, but something ultimately more fascinating. Gladwell led me to a chapter in [The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance](#)—the much-cited but little-read (by regular people) academic tome. "Professional Writing Expertise," by Ronald Kellogg, contains

Search

**Trend 1:**  
**Reduce Travel Costs**

Learn how to move in-person training online with the 7 trends of online training.  
Read the eBook.

[Download eBook](#)

**GoToTraining** by **CITRIX**

### ALSO IN SLATE


### RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

- [The No. 1 Girl Next Door](#) ([www.redbullusa.com](#))
- [True Blood Actor Denis O'Hare Marries Hugo Redwood](#) ([Us Weekly](#))
- [Top Ten Turkey Off-the-Beaten-Path Adventures](#) ([Away.com](#))
- [Under the Stars near Seattle](#) ([Away.com](#))
- [Five Tech Products that Will Be Dead in Five Years](#) ([Techlicious](#))

[what's this]

**Slate.com** on Facebook

Like 153,120

[Sign Up](#) Create an account or [log in](#) to See what your friends are doing.

**Restaurant websites: Why are they so awful? Which ones are the absolute worst?**  
1,404 people recommend this.

enough writerly insight to fuel a thousand Iowa workshops. And the opening words could not be more comforting: "Writing extended texts for publication is a major cognitive challenge, even for professionals who compose for a living." See, Dad! This is hard work.

Kellogg, a psychologist at Saint Louis University, tours the research in the field, where many of the landmarks are his own. Some writers are "Beethovenians" who disdain outlines and notes and instead "compose rough drafts immediately to discover what they have to say." Others are "Mozartians"—cough, cough—who have been known to "delay drafting for lengthy periods of time in order to allow for extensive reflection and planning." According to Kellogg, perfect-first-drafters and full-steam-aheaders report the same amount of productivity. Methinks someone is lying. And feel free to quote this line the next time an editor is nudging you for copy: "Although prewriting can be brief, experts approaching a serious writing assignment may spend hours, days, or weeks thinking about the task before initiating the draft."

The scientifically-tested fun facts abound. Ann Chenoweth and John Hayes (2001) found that sentences are generated in a burst-pause-evaluate, burst-pause-evaluate pattern, with more experienced writers producing longer word bursts. A curly-haired girl on a white porch swing on a hot summer day will be more likely to remember what you've written if you employ concrete language—so says a 1995 study. S. K. Perry reports that the promise of money has a way of stimulating writerly "flow." Amazing! One also finds dreadful confirmation of one's worst habits: "Binge writing—hypomaniac, euphoric marathon sessions to meet unrealistic deadlines—is generally counterproductive and potentially a source of depression and blocking," sums up the work of Robert Boice. One strategy: Try to limit your working hours, write at a set time each day, and try your best not to emotionally flip out or check email every 20 seconds. This is called "engineering" your environment.

Kellogg is always careful to emphasize the extreme cognitive demands of writing, which is very flattering. "Serious writing is at once a thinking task, a language task, and a memory task," he declares. It requires the same kind of mental effort as a high-level chess match or an expert musical performance. We are all aspiring Mozarts indeed. So what's holding us back? How does one write faster? Kellogg terms the highest level of writing as "knowledge-crafting." In that state, the writer's brain is juggling three things: the actual text, what you plan to say next, and—most crucially—theories of how your imagined readership will interpret what's being written. A highly skilled writer can simultaneously be a writer, editor, and audience.

Since writing is such a cognitively intense task, the key to becoming faster is to develop strategies to make writing literally less mind-blowing. Growing up, we all become speedier writers when our penmanship becomes automatic and we no longer have to think consciously about subject-verb agreement. It's obviously a huge help to write about a subject you know well. In that case, the writer doesn't have to keep all of the facts in her working memory, freeing up more attention for planning and composing.

The modern multitasking style of composing next to an open Internet browser is one solution to limiting writing's cognitive burden. There are experimental programs that will analyze what you are writing and attempt to retrieve relevant definitions, facts, and documents from the Web in case you need them. Like many writers, I take a lot of notes before I compose a first draft. The research verifies that taking notes makes writing easier—as long as you don't look at them while you are writing the draft! Doing so causes a writer to jump into reviewing/evaluating mode instead of getting on with the business of getting words on the screen.

Alas, the cognitive literature offers no easy solutions. The same formula appears: "Self-regulation through daily writing, brief work sessions, realistic deadlines, and maintaining low emotional arousal." My old enemy, self-regulation. We meet again.

Kellogg does offer a few takeaway hints for would-be writers. First, if you haven't been writing stories since you were a little kid, give yourself a break since you are actually a "late bloomer." Second, read everything, all the time. That's the only way to build the general knowledge that you can tuck away in long-term memory, only to one day have it magically surface when you're searching for just the right turn of phrase. And, lastly, the trickiest part of writing—from a cognitive perspective—is getting outside of yourself, of seeing your



An appeals court allows a suit against Donald Rumsfeld to go forward.

1,752 people recommend this.



Is Newsweek's Michele Bachmann Cover

[View My Network on Slate >>](#)

**The Washington Post HIGHLIGHTS**



**How GOP 'Young Guns' drove debt showdown**

[U.S. to grant states 'No Child' waivers](#)  
[Rick Perry's positive 'Response'](#)  
[Has welfare state won budget war?](#)

MOST READ

MOST E-MAILED

- 1. Overdone**  
Why are restaurant websites so horrifically bad?  
By Farhad Manjoo | Aug 9, 2011
- 2. When Dollar Stores Are Too Expensive**  
You know the economy is in bad shape when customers can't afford to shop at dollar stores anymore.  
By Annie Lowrey | Aug 3, 2011
- 3. Janette Sadik-Khan, New York City Transportation Commissioner**  
An urban visionary who cuts through the gridlock.  
By Will Oremus | Aug 8, 2011
- 4. I Watched Every Coen Brothers Movie**  
Here's what I learned.  
By David Haglund | Aug 10, 2011
- 5. My Fake Facebook Birthdays**  
What happened when I celebrated my Facebook birthday on July 11. And July 25. And July 28.  
By David Plotz | Aug 2, 2011

TODAY'S PICTURES

TODAY'S CARTOONS

TODAY'S DOONESBURY

TODAY'S VIDEO

Lazy days.



**GET TODAY IN SLATE**

Sign up for **Slate's** daily newsletter.

Enter your e-mail address.

**MORE BROWSER, THE COLUMNS**

**Slowpoke**

How to be a faster writer.

writing through the eyes of others.

Most writers spend their entire careers happily avoiding such an emotional root canal. But not me! I'll read each and every one of your comments. After I go get coffee and a muffin. "Maybe banana nut. [That's a good muffin.](#)"

2 Comments Add Yours Or join the discussion on [the Fray](#)

Like This Story  48 likes. [Sign Up](#) to see what your friends like.

### MORE FROM SLATE

- [David Epstein incest case: A Columbia professor was charged with having sex with his adult daughter. Isn't she guilty, too?](#)
- [How did a drummer who never intended to make money from music end up as one of the biggest and wealthiest rock stars?](#)
- [The Worst Oscar-Winning Performances Ever](#)
- [Tim Tebow's Non-Abortion](#)
- [South Dakota Law Requires Women to Hear Anti-Choice Lectures](#)
- [A Wonderful British Radio Soap About Livestock and Love Affairs](#)

### MORE FROM THE WEB

- [The No. 1 Girl Next Door](#) (from [www.redbullusa.com](#))
- [Top Ten Turkey Off-the-Beaten-Path Adventures](#) (from [Away.com](#))
- [Five Tech Products that Will Be Dead in Five Years](#) (from [Techlicious](#))
- [What Not to Do: Awesomely Awkward Pregnancy Photos](#) (from [iVillage.com](#))
- [True Blood Actor Denis O'Hare Marries Hugo Redwood](#) (from [Us Weekly](#))
- [Under the Stars near Seattle](#) (from [Away.com](#))

[what's this]

Michael Agger | Aug. 10, 2011

#### 4chanomics

What the influential, hilarious, revolting message board teaches us about Internet culture.

Michael Agger | June 28, 2011

#### Earthquake Japan Help

How Google responds to crises. Plus, the best emergency apps for your phone.

Michael Agger | March 11, 2011

[Search for more Browser, The articles](#)

[Subscribe to the Browser, The RSS feed](#)

[View our complete Browser, The archive](#)

I watched every Coen brothers movie. Here's what I learned: <http://slate.me/q5RBqF>

Audio Book Club: A Visit From the Goon Squad. <http://slate.me/prQmsF>

England's novelists and filmmakers saw the riots coming. <http://slate.me/mUwB60>



- [Somali President to Rid Country of Islamist Rebels?](#)
- [Obama Greeted Bodies of Dead Service Members](#)
- [David Cameron: 'We Will Not Put Up With This'](#)




- [Trouble in Triple-A World: Are the Remaining Countries With Rock-Solid Credit Scores as Stable as They Seem?](#)
- [Revolution's End: Looking at the Arab Spring Through 20 Years of Post-Soviet History](#)
- [From Gay Bashing to Untouchables, What Happens When the World Gets Rid of Bad Old Habits?](#)

### FINANCIAL TIMES

- [China takes a short-cut to power](#)
- [Bond plan could end the euro crisis](#)
- [How west can reverse a decade of decline](#)


 
 
 
 



 *Michael Agger* is a **Slate** senior editor. Follow him on [Twitter](#). E-mail him at [Michaelagger1@gmail.com](mailto:Michaelagger1@gmail.com).

Typewriter by [Istockphoto](#).


#### Sponsored Links

#### Mortgage Rates Hit 2.50%

 Homeowners Are Using This Ridiculously Easy Trick To Pay Off Their Homes In Half The Time! (3.1 APR) [www.SeeRefinanceRates.com](http://www.SeeRefinanceRates.com)


 Login required, click here to begin

[Follow](#) [Cancel](#) [Post](#)

 **Bookfraud**  
The best way to write faster?



Don't waste your time reading essays on writing faster that offer no advice except "Write a lot, read a lot, and have empathy with others."  
Today, 9:43:49 AM PDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



**jude folly**  
the question is: how long did this piece take you?  
i don't know about the secret to fast writing, but the secret to great writing is minding word choice and syntax.  
Today, 9:13:59 AM PDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)

Social Networking by Echo

**If comments do not automatically load, click here.**

---

**Sponsored Links**

**We Buy All Type Pensions**

We buy military, VA Disability, police, teacher and all type pensions!  
[www.WeBuyPensions.com](http://www.WeBuyPensions.com)

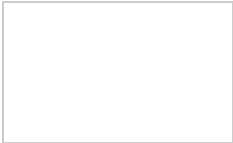
**\$250,000 Life insurance**

Coverage for \$10.94/mon! Protect Your Family Today.  
[www.QuoteWhiz.com](http://www.QuoteWhiz.com)

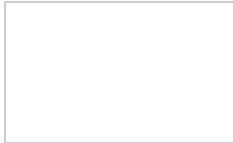
**3 Hot Penny Stock Alert**

Get 3 daily penny picks set to explode, totally free  
[www.MadPennyStocks.com](http://www.MadPennyStocks.com)

[Buy a link here](#)



**The Real Reason Britons Are Rioting? They Might Just Want Free Stuff and a Good Time.**



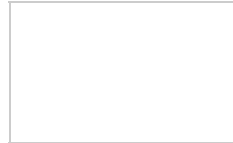
**Michele Bachmann Says the Market Plunge Proved She Was Right To Oppose the Debt-Ceiling Increase**



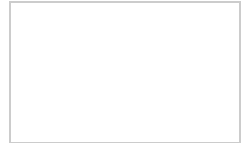
**Does a Falling Stock Price Affect a Company's Day-to-Day Operations?**



**My Sorority Sister Throws Tantrums When She's Drunk. Should I Dump Her?**



**The Woman Who Is Making New York City Safe for Motorists, Cyclists, and Pedestrians**



**Should You Be Outraged by *The Help's* Portrayal of Race Relations?**

[site map](#) | [build your own Slate](#) | [the fray](#) | [about us](#) | [contact us](#) | [Slate on Facebook](#) | [search](#) | [ad choices](#)  
[feedback](#) | [help](#) | [advertise](#) | [newsletters](#) | [mobile](#) | [make Slate your homepage](#)

Slate is published by The Slate Group, a Division of the Washington Post Company  
All contents © 2011 The Slate Group, LLC. All rights reserved. User Agreement and Privacy Policy

