

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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ADVICE

## 'It's 300 Words — How Long Could It Take?' and Other Writing Traps

Advice from a productivity expert on shortcuts for drafting conference papers and abstracts.

By *Rebecca Schuman*

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JOYCE HESSLEBERTH FOR THE CHRONICLE

*Note: In the “Are You Working?” series, a Ph.D. and academic-writing coach answers questions from faculty members and graduate students about scholarly motivation and productivity. This month’s questions arrived via the social-media platform [X](#) and [Facebook](#). Read her previous columns [here](#).*

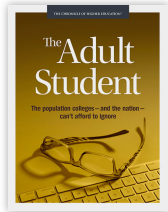
**Question:** How do I not be one of these “I wrote my paper on the plane” scholars at conferences? (Or, realistically in the enduring age of Zoom, the night before the panel, since usually I don’t even take the plane ride anymore?)

**As an audience member it always feels kind of insulting to hear a paper someone clearly threw together at the last minute — and yet, every year the conferences creep up on me and I find the same thing happening. Do you have a reliable method of finishing conference papers ahead of time?**

## Signed, Tired of Finishing Just Under the Wire

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REPORT

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Dear Wired,

First of all, I commend you for wanting to be part of the solution. No matter how you feel about attending or skipping the Big Disciplinary Meeting, one constant remains the same: The very individuals who often impose Draconian punishments on students who submit late assignments also regularly saunter up to the conference podium, real or virtual, and subject their 8:15 a.m. audience to a half-formed piece they dashed off the night before in 45 minutes. (“In this paper I will ...” — but will you, though?)

The good news is, you don't have to clone yourself — or, God forbid, outsource your writing to an AI chatbot — to compose a conference paper more or less on time. A strategy that I recommend, when I work with academics as a writing coach, involves unleashing a delicate series of manipulations and lies — upon yourself.

**Lie No 1: Tell yourself it's business as usual.** When your paper gets accepted almost a year before the conference itself, go ahead and pretend the deadline for submitting it to the moderator doesn't exist. Anything you write now will be incomprehensible to future-you anyway, so go ahead and keep the magical-thinking phase intact.

**Lie No. 2: Start thinking on paper two months before the conference.** Yes, you read that right: two months. Tell yourself you don't actually have to *write* the paper; you

just have to get some inchoate thoughts out. That is the entire assignment, and it's due today. Block out a single afternoon (perhaps when you have a bunch of onerous grading that requires a little procrastination) and do two things:

- First, comb through all of your published and in-progress research to see what, if anything, you can extract and recycle from your current and past work. The members of this panel accepted you because they purport to enjoy your schtick. Give the people what they want. Spend two hours copying-and-pasting some fragments into a new document — labeled with a casual title (“Undigested Conference Pre-thoughts”) to take the pressure off.
- Then after each fragment you've pasted into the document, do a little free association. Spew some thoughts onto the page, the rougher the better. Don't worry about making anything look pretty or coherent. Then set it aside and return to Lie No. 1.

**Lie No 3: A month before the conference, put on your editing hat.** You're not the author of this conference paper now due in a month; you're just its editor. Pull up your pre-thoughts document and spend exactly one more afternoon reading it like an editor would.

Don't sugarcoat it. Be critical and specific. Mark up things to fix and finish that “the author” — and not you, the editor — will have to worry about at some later date that might as well not exist. Then set it aside and resume Lie No. 1 again.

**Final step (no longer a lie): A week before the conference, go into writer mode.** Pull up your almost-forgotten conference paper that is two-thirds done. You're the author now, and all you have to do is make — or ignore — a short list of sharply-worded changes that some rude editor suggested a month ago.

Of course the night before you present your paper, you may look at it, panic, and decide it's all nonsense that must be entirely rewritten. Do not, under any

circumstances, listen to this voice in your head. Acknowledge it: *Oh, hello, intrusive thought. You are a panic response because I am afraid of the sometimes-withering critique of my peers.* Thank the intrusive thought for its service, but do not heed it. Then descend upon your conference as the best-prepared person in the convention center. (Don't forget to hydrate.)

**Question: Why does it take me so long to write a 300-word abstract of my journal article? It's only 300 words! I used to be able to write 300 words in half an hour. And yet, every time I sit down to write this abstract I have due soon, I just write and delete for an entire day and somehow end up with negative words by the end of it. Do you have any abstract-writing tips?**

**Signed,**  
**Please Make the Abstract Concrete**

Dear Concrete,

This is an easy one — I mean for me to answer, not for you to resolve. Your first mistake was to think, understandably: *How hard could it be to write a 300-word abstract?* The answer is: hard. Abstracts are hard. If it were easy to distill the very complex thoughts of a 30-page academic article into 300 words, then you wouldn't have had to write the article in the first place.

Like a lot of academics, you may face the creeping (but probably true) fear that most people won't even read past the abstract. So those 300 words may be all that your peers will ever know about you and the quality of your work and your mind, and ... — see the problem here? Not all 300-word chunks of verbiage are equal.

Your first wise course of action: Give this abstract the proper amount of mental and emotional weight it deserves. Recognize that this is a hard thing you have to do, and it will probably take more than a day.

The second mistake most of us make with a “short” task like this one is to believe that it’s a single task. In fact, no polished piece of scholarly writing, no matter its length, is a single task. Getting a difficult thought out onto (virtual) paper, and making that thought sound elegant and coherent, are actually two completely distinct actions. Think of them as two discrete circles, rather than as a Venn diagram or a single circle.

The answer, then, is to approach an abstract in two stages:

- Give yourself a pressure-free day to draft it. Once again, it’s time to spew out thoughts onto the page without any regard for how they sound or read. Set a timer for about an hour, freewrite in 15-to-20-minute spurts, and — this is the crucial part — do not allow yourself to delete a single word.
- Then, on a completely different day, when you’ve had time away from the initial draft, return to it and begin the (much easier) task of taking thoughts that already exist, and deciding whether they should stay or go, making them sound pretty, and then putting them into an acceptable order.

That may sound like more work than “just” writing a 300-word abstract, but when you factor in all of the pain, suffering, and deleted words that you will now be bypassing, I think you’ll find this method actually saves time. You might even have extra hours to catch up on those conference papers that you also have due.

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

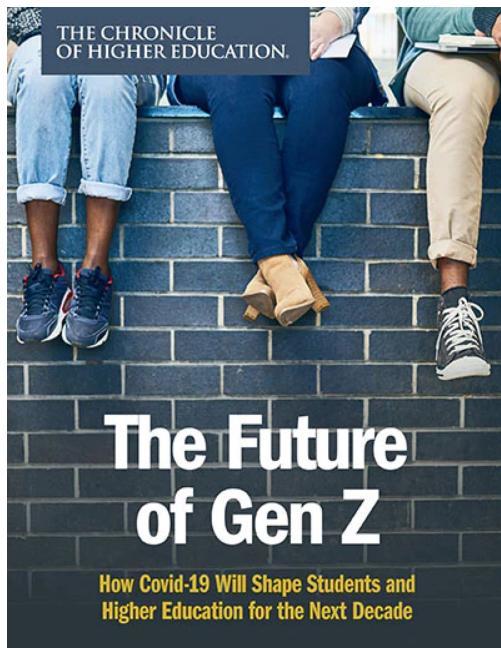
PERSONAL PRODUCTIVITY

**Rebecca Schuman**

Rebecca Schuman is an academic productivity consultant and a professor pro tempore of English, German, and Journalism at the University of Oregon, as well as an

instructor of creative writing in the Stanford Continuing Studies program. Ask her a question on academic writing or productivity via [X](#), [Facebook](#), or [email](#). She is on the social-media platform X [@pankisseskafka](#).

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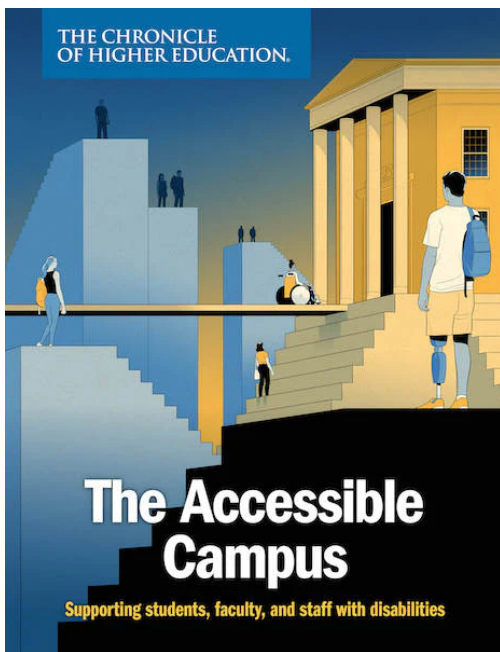


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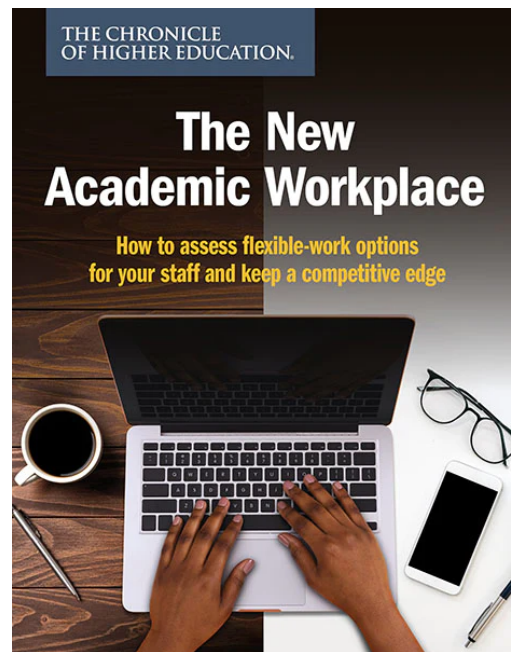


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