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The #RxWritingChallenge: A way to boost productivity and camaraderie and overcome writing barriers - A programme description and quality improvement survey

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Abstract

The #RxWritingChallenge is a focused period in which pharmacy writers commit to write for 30 minutes per day for two weeks as a personal challenge to increase their scholarly output. It combines elements of dedicating short, consistent blocks of time to writing with the camaraderie of a writing group. The #RxWritingChallenge addresses some of the common issues leading to lower than desired scholarly output: time management, writing skills and habits, accountability, and emotional barriers. As part of Objective 4 of the FIP Academic Section's strategic plan, promote scholarship in pharmaceutical education, participation in the March 2021 #RxWritingChallenge was encouraged. Members who began the challenge chose to participate for solidarity, improved productivity, to complete a specific project, and to improve their writing. All who completed the post-challenge survey indicated they would participate in future challenges. Combined benefits of regular, short blocks dedicated to writing and accountability to a community of writers make the #RxWritingChallenge an attractive proposition for pharmacy academics.

Background

Many pharmacy academics have a portion of their time dedicated to scholarship or research. The end result of that research is generally a published manuscript. In fact, the production of publications is often a major metric in performance evaluations and promotion and tenure reviews. Why, then, is it so challenging for academics to write?

Many reasons for low manuscript output are given by academics. These can be loosely grouped into resource issues, skills issues, and emotional issues (Table I). Looking first at resource-based issues, the most prominent is that there is 'no time'. Other priorities such as teaching and clinical practice are placed before writing productivity

(Bourgault *et al.*, 2022). Many academics feel they must have large blocks of time in which to write, for example, an entire half day, but they cannot find these uninterrupted times during the work week. Thus, writing is often viewed as a task that must occur on weekends or evenings, making it a chore instead part of the core activity for an academic (Bourgault *et al.*, 2022). When writing is relegated to these times, then either personal and/or family commitments and pleasurable activities or the writing must be forsaken.

These ideas about the need for large, dedicated blocks of time for writing have been challenged. While not studied in health care professionals, Boice examined 16 new faculty hires divided into those who wrote in binges and those who wrote in brief, daily sessions (1997). He found

that the brief, daily session writers were more productive in terms of number of pages produced per month and manuscripts accepted per year. They were also less likely to report depression associated with writing (Boice, 1997).

Table I: Common barriers to faculty writing productivity

Resource-based	Lack of time to write
	Low priority given to writing
	Personal/family commitments
Skill-based	Lack of training
	Low accountability
	Time management
Emotion-based	Guilt about not writing
	Inertia
	Fear of exposure and rejection
	Perfectionism
	Pressure to publish

Some writers enjoy writing sprints. These are timed bursts of focused writing (Bennett, 2018). Sprints can be done individually or in an in person or virtual setting with a group. They usually involve setting a timer for a specified length of time and may benefit from setting other goals such as the number of words or a specific writing task such as formatting references. Advantages of writing sprints are addressing writer's block and time constraints (Bennett, 2018). Sprints can be as short as five minutes or as long as a week. In longer ones, teams may draft papers and work collaboratively on them (Sinha *et al*., 2018). These collaborative sprints improve efficiency, foster networking, and increase group cohesiveness (Merriam *et al*., 2021).

Skills associated with writing are often not well-developed among faculty. Time management is the most commonly acknowledged skill deficiency and, perhaps, the most easily corrected (Bourgault *et al*., 2022). This skill is intertwined with the lack of time often mentioned above. Prioritising writing, making calendar appointments for writing, and integrating writing into the daily routine are all ways to address the time management issue. Another possible skill-based reason for lack of productivity is that the faculty member may not be trained on writing skills and habits (Thorpe *et al*., 2020). This lack of knowledge is particularly prominent if writing was not emphasised in science-heavy professional or post-graduate training. Ways this deficiency could be addressed are to complete a scientific writing course, to explore campus resources for writing skill development, or to work with a mentor.

Another common skill-based issue with faculty writing is accountability. Many other aspects of faculty life have automatic accountability, such as preparing a lecture for a specific date and time. However, most writing projects do not come with a deadline and thus fall prey to the demands of other tasks which do have deadlines. Writing accountability groups can be helpful to establish a regular pattern, provide accountability, and provide social support (Bourgault *et al*., 2022). Academic writing groups promote writing accountability, foster mentoring, and increase publications (Candib *et al*., 2021). Bodenberg and Nicholas (2019) also suggest that the social aspects of writing, writing for, with, and among others, can help with motivation and accountability. These general statements were demonstrated by the Fleming and colleagues (2017) analysis of faculty placed in a research/writing group which held monthly meetings designed to motivate, offer accountability, and provide interim deadlines for projects. This group was compared to a similar group of faculty that did not have these meetings. Scholarly productivity was greater in the research/writing group members at the end of three years, and they attributed their success, in part, to the group. While there are some reports of virtual groups (Bourgault *et al*., 2022), most writing groups have occurred in person where participants physically come together to write. The present description is of an informal, limited-time writing group supported virtually.

There are many emotional barriers to writing and these are often not acknowledged. There may be difficulty getting started or not knowing where to start on a particular project (Bourgault *et al*., 2022). A tendency toward perfectionism can undermine progress on writing (Bourgault *et al*., 2022; Rockquemore, n.d.). Negative self-talk and fear of criticism can also be deterrents to writing (Hairston, 1986; Rockquemore, n.d.). Finally, there is guilt about not making progress which can ironically keep the individual from making progress. Behavioural actions that predict success in writing are persistence, determination, passion, pragmatism, and grit (Sword, 2018). These actions can be developed.

Programme description

A movement within pharmacy, the #RxWritingChallenge, has the potential to overcome many of the barriers to writing productivity. The #RxWritingChallenge was initiated by the Wulling Center for Innovation and Scholarship in Pharmacy Education at the University of Minnesota in 2017 (*#RxWritingChallenge*). The #RxWritingChallenge is based on the 14-day Writing Challenge developed by the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity (*The 14-day writing challenge: experience explosive writing productivity,* n.d.). The motivation for

developing that challenge was to encourage faculty to develop a daily writing habit (Rockquemore, n.d.). The #RxWritingChallenge combines elements proven to increase faculty writing productivity: dedicating short, daily blocks of time to writing; accountability; and writing sprints.

The #RxWritingChallenge is a focused period in which pharmacy writers make a commitment to write for 30 minutes per day for two weeks. It occurs twice in an academic year, once in each of the semesters. This two-week period has a celebratory feeling with various activities occurring during that time. Daily advice and tips on writing are sent to registered participants via email. A number of webinars are held providing writing advice and suggesting ways to integrate writing into the workday. Many schools and organisations also host events during the #RxWritingChallenge to support those who are participating. Individuals use Twitter to talk about their writing, their successes, and their frustrations. The hashtag #RxWritingChallenge is used on Twitter (https://twitter.com/search?q=%23RxWritingChallenge& src=typed_query&f=live).

The #RxWritingChallege organizers suggest scheduling protected 30-minute blocks of time on the calendar to write (Janke *et al.*, 2019). While these are regular writing sessions, they are relatively small, and individuals are able to work them into their days for a short period. Accountability for writing is also helpful, whether it is accountability to yourself, to one other individual, or to a group (Janke *et al.*, 2019). The #RxWritingChallenge provides this accountability via social media as well as any individual accountability that the writer chooses. The participant should also choose topics, times, and conditions that are most productive for him or her (Janke *et al.*, 2019).

Other suggestions that may optimise writing sessions include: setting a task for the writing block, being sure to suit the task to the time; setting a timer; avoiding distractions such as email or checking the calendar during the writing block of time; using a reference manager software; and closing with a note to oneself about the next step to facilitate easy return to the material (Janke *et al.*, 2019).

As part of Objective 4 of the FIP Academic Section's strategic plan, promote scholarship in pharmaceutical education, participation in the March 2021 #RxWritingChallenge was encouraged. An item was placed in the Academic Section's newsletter (circulation is approximately 850 members) asking those interested to complete a Qualtrics survey before and after the challenge to better understand the particular needs of Academic Section writers (see Appendix A and Appendix B). Because the primary purpose of the survey was to guide the Academic

Section for quality assurance member support, it was not validated, and no additional contact was made with prospective participants. The project was reviewed by the University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board and deemed not human subjects' research.

Evaluation

Twenty seven participants who began the challenge completed the pre-challenge survey. The countries of the participants were Australia, Canada, Germany, Greece, India, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Malaysia, Nigeria, Palestine, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States of America, and Yemen. Participants were asked why they were participating in the #RxWritingChallenge. The majority chose 'for solidarity with my academic colleagues around the world' (66%), 'I want to improve my productivity' (66%), 'to get a specific project completed' (63%), and 'I want to improve my writing' (56%) (Figure 1).
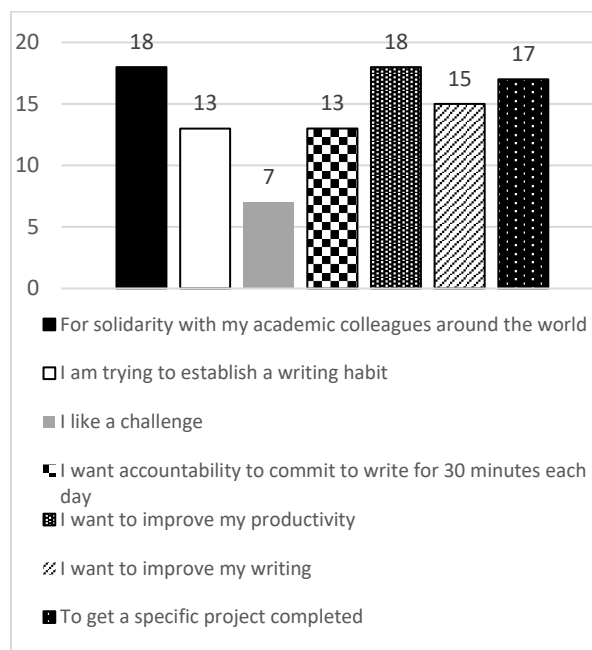
Figure 1: Reasons given by FIP Academic Section members (n = 27) for participating in the #RxWritingChallenge

A follow-up survey after the #RxWritingChallenge garnered only five responses. One participant reported writing every weekday, two wrote on some days, and two started the Challenge, but didn't finish it. All participants reported that the #RxWritingChallenge was helpful in ways that largely mirrored the pre-Challenge responses. Challenges reported were other tasks coming up during the day (n=3) and having to put

off other important work to write (n=2). All respondents indicated they would participate in future challenges and that they felt it was an appropriate event for the FIP Academic Section to sponsor. Of course, these data are limited by the small number of responses and the potential for response bias in the follow up survey.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the combined benefits of regular, short blocks dedicated to writing and the accountability of a community of writers make the #RxWritingChallenge an attractive proposition for pharmacy academics. Research on habit formation indicates that it takes a mean of 66 days to establish a new behaviour, but there is a wide range (18 - 254 days) (Lally *et al.*, 2010). For some members, short writing blocks have become part of their daily routine. In fact, this article was written entirely in 30-minute blocks of time devoted to writing. For others, the #RxWritingChallenge can give them a boost to start or complete a writing project. Given the success of the #RxWritingChallenge in general and the interest from the Academic Section membership, the Section will continue to encourage participation in future challenges.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Pre-challenge survey instruments

Q1. I am planning to take part in the #RxWriting Challenge March 22-April 4, 2021 _____(name)
Q2. My email (optional, to receive encouragement and to follow up to see how it went). _____
Q3. My institution _____
Q4. My country _____

Q5. I am taking part in the #RxWritingChallenge because (choose all that apply):
- ☐ I want to improve my writing.
- ☐ I want to improve my productivity.
- ☐ I want accountability to commit to write for 30 minutes each day.
- ☐ I am trying to establish a writing habit.
- ☐ For solidarity with my academic colleagues around the world.
- ☐ To get a specific project completed.
- ☐ I like a challenge.
- ☐ Other (please list below).

Q6. Please describe the 'other' answer.

Appendix B: Post-challenge survey instruments

Q1. My name is: (only used to match with your previous answers, you can elect not to answer this question) _____

Q2. I took part in the #RxWritingChallenge between March 28 and April 8, 2022:
- ☐ Every weekday
- ☐ Some days
- ☐ I started strong, but didn't finish
- ☐ I didn't participate

Q3. I thought the #RxWritingChallenge was helpful in the following ways (select all that apply):
- ☐ Improving my productivity
- ☐ Improving my accountability
- ☐ Establishing a writing habit
- ☐ Developing a feeling of solidarity with my academic colleagues from around the world
- ☐ Getting a specific project completed
- ☐ Allowing me to feel challenged
- ☐ It wasn't helpful
- ☐ Other

Q4. Please describe the 'other' answer.

Q5. I thought the #RxWritingChallenge was difficult because (select all that apply):
- ☐ I had to put off other important work to write
- ☐ Other tasks came up during the day
- ☐ I didn't know where to begin
- ☐ I didn't know what to do
- ☐ I had to wait on my collaborators
- ☐ I didn't like feeling forced to write
- ☐ I felt guilty all the time
- ☐ It wasn't difficult
- ☐ Other

Q6. Please describe the 'other' answer.

Q7. I would do the #RxWritingChallenge again.
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ No

Q8. I found the #RxWritingChallenge an appropriate thing for the FIP Academic Section to sponsor
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Q9. Is there anything that would help you with the #RxWritingChallenge? Is there anything else you would like us to know? _____