If you write for a living—or if your living involves writing, as is often the case for scholars—you know that writing does not always come easily. Through experience you learn what works: when you can be most productive; how to schedule and structure your writing time; how to set realistic goals (and who can support these goals); which rituals and routines suit your personality and the ever-evolving exigencies of your life. For those who are newer to scholarly writing for publication, though, the challenges to writing enjoyably and with a sense of purpose can easily overwhelm. Do not despair. By identifying and emphasizing what you can control with respect to writing, this pair of books offers tools and strategies for self-reflection and for understanding—and ultimately for improving the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of your writing practice.

Christian Wymann of Bern, Switzerland, presents serious, straightforward, and sensible perspectives and advice in *Mind Your Writing: How to Be a Professional Academic Writer*. With content gleaned from six years spent as a writing coach and framed as responses to ten fundamental questions about writing, the brief chapters (averaging just seven
pages) underscore that the best approach to writing is individualized and grounded in self-awareness. Wymann’s chapter titles disclose questions central to his coaching practice. For example, ‘Why Do You Write?’ (chapter 1) explores the importance of understanding motivation, both fundamentally and on a project-by-project basis. Chapter 4, ‘What’s Your Writing Strategy?,’ offers a wake-up call to the importance of ‘mindful’ writing (and to having a strategy in the first place): Whatever approach you employ, ‘you will profit most when you know what you’re doing and why’ (42). Indeed, the ‘professional’ in the subtitle is a nod to the importance of self-awareness and self-analysis: ‘Professionals analyze what works and what doesn’t work for them in order to find solutions for better performance in the future’ (7). The for them is key. Individual situations vary, so anyone who posits one-size-fits-all approaches to writing misunderstands the variability and complexity of the enterprise.

I appreciate the placement of chapter 9, ‘What Blocks Your Writing?,’ since many books on writing for publication start with the challenges, setting a negative tone overall. (Instead, Wymann opens positively, with motivations and goals.) In this chapter, Wymann invokes Joli Jensen in noting that thoughts, beliefs, and expectations about writing can become impediments—but all are mental constructs and may differ from reality.‘Clear the obstacles from your writing path or, at least, find a way to get around them,’ he advises (77). Earlier, Wymann offers another thought resonant with Jensen when he writes that if a project ‘goes against your core motivation, you should ‘reject the project or modify it to the degree that fits your motivation’ (13). (I remember my surprise—and, frankly, my relief—in encountering this liberating concept in Jensen’s book, in her chapter titled ‘Relinquishing Toxic Projects: Just ‘let go of a project you’ve come to loathe.’)2

Wymann offers helpful material on how to ask for informal feedback on a draft in chapter 8, ‘What Does Text Feedback Mean to You?’ He makes a convincing argument for the importance of ‘feedback instructions’ shared alongside a draft. And his advice flows both ways: ‘Whenever you’re asked to give informal feedback on a colleague’s or even student’s text, ask for feedback instructions. It will make your work more efficient and effective, because you will comment on the things that the author wants to know about’ (68–69).3

Graduate students, new faculty members, and others who are eager to start sharing their scholarly ideas in writing embody the ideal audience
for this brief yet powerful book. I plan to mention *Mind Your Writing* to doctoral students who seem stuck or stalled or who otherwise indicate that their writing practice could benefit from some recalibration. More seasoned scholarly writers could also refresh or refine their practice by reading this book, given its focus on exhibiting agency, cultivating mastery, and making writing decisions deliberately. What Wymann considers ‘professional’ behaviour—the constant self-reflecting, adjusting, assessing, and readjusting—feels akin to the Japanese concept of *kaizen*, or ‘continuous improvement.’ Anyone who writes for scholarly publication, a little or a lot, knows the persistence of room for growth.

Say, then that you’d like to follow Wymann’s advice and clear the obstacles from your writing path. Sharon Zumbrunn comes to your rescue with wit and a distinctive voice. In *Why Aren’t You Writing? Research, Real Talk, Strategies, and Shenanigans*, a book that presents valuable insights and suggestions without taking itself too seriously, Zumbrunn offers a refreshing, invigorating approach that addresses a similar audience and otherwise aligns well with Wymann’s core premises. Zumbrunn agrees that ‘to become excellent and productive in our writing, we must first understand ourselves as writers’ (2). She promises no quick fixes: ‘The truth is, being a peaceful and productive writer is a lot like sweeping the floor. You don’t just sweep it once and think to yourself, “Grand, now I’ll never have to sweep it again. My work here is done”’ (4–5). Rather, the ‘mind work’ of writing requires revisiting, resetting, retooling, and recalibrating over time. I’m struck by the role of meditative sweeping as a centring, focusing practice in certain strands of Buddhism, just as I’m struck by the consonance with *kaizen* in Zumbrunn’s presentation of how we must constantly work at our writing practice. Well, we don’t call it a *practice* for nothing.

As an associate professor of educational psychology and the co-director of the Motivation in Context Research Lab at Virginia Commonwealth University, Zumbrunn grounds her presentation in studies of social, emotional, motivational, psychological, and physiological barriers to productive writing. After an introduction, each of her eight core chapters, averaging eighteen pages, follows a sensible pattern: A presentation of research precedes a selection of ‘essential strategies,’ realistic action items, additional resources, a ‘humor break’ (the ‘shenanigans’ in the subtitle), and references. The research is both germane and digestible, but readers who want just the highlights can skip to the ‘TL;DR’ (too long; didn’t read) summaries that set up the strategies and action items.4
Wymann provides a framework for self-understanding; Zumbrunn provides the underlying science—with chapters addressing perceptions, stress and anxiety, self-efficacy, perfectionism, autonomy, social support, and wellness—and strategies for approaching the realities of the writing life in clear and realistic ways. In ‘Imposter Syndrome and Writer Identity’ (chapter 2), Zumbrunn notes that ‘the idea of “perfect” is a cruel joke created by misery fairies’ (19). She elaborates in a chapter titled ‘Maladaptive Perfectionism’ (chapter 5), where she presents the concept of atelophobia (the fear of imperfection) yet wisely differentiates between ‘excellence’ (potentially realistic) and ‘perfection’ (always unrealistic): ‘Standards for excellence are important, but there’s a difference between your best and perfect’ (74).

I’ve been reviewing books on writing for some time now, and Zumbrunn’s is the first to suggest that we actually name our writing projects, because we have relationships with them and because ‘each of our projects have a personality of their own’ (29). Seriously. Zumbrunn named her dissertation ‘Lillian,’ calling her ‘Lilly’ on the ‘good days. Lillian, her proper name, was reserved for the struggle days (kind of like the way adults use their kids’ full names when they are really in trouble)’ (29). Granted, this lighthearted suggestion may land pretty high up the eye-roll scale for some readers, but I appreciate how time scheduled for working on a writing project appears to be a meeting and therefore to be more ‘important.’ A figure in chapter 4, ‘Writing Self-Efficacy,’ shows an image of Zumbrunn’s ‘progress tracking board,’ with each of her concurrent writing projects—journal articles, book chapters, conference presentations, grant proposals, and the like—named: We meet Beth, Big Chester, Dory, Gary, Felicia, Luigi, Michelle, Minerva, Patty, Savanna, and others (54). But let me revise Zumbrunn’s suggestion about plotting our ‘responsibilities and to-do list at the beginning of each week’ in order to ‘identify available chunks of time’ where we can ‘slot in’ our writing (32). Were I to do so, my week would be filled before I could get to a single writing project of my own. Your life may be similarly full. I recommend, instead, actively prioritizing your writing projects and including them on your to-do lists; doing so helps you ‘hold your writing time sacred’ (32).

Anyone who feels writing is serious business and may be put off by ‘shenanigans’ can skip Zumbrunn’s ‘humor breaks’ and ignore most of the footnotes. Anyone for whom English is not a first language (or
anyone above a certain age) may stumble over some of the contemporary slang; the *Urban Dictionary* ultimately proved more helpful to me than my trusty *Merriam-Webster’s*, particularly for nouveau terms that appear with more than one styling (such as *ridic* and *redic*, both apparently short for *ridiculous*). But one of Zumbrunn’s goals is for readers to be able to practice ‘writing with greater peace’ (136). And achieving peace sometimes requires us to laugh and put things into proper perspective.

Even if you’re not feeling unfocused, unmotivated, or overwhelmed in your writing practice, consider scheduling some time with Wymann or Zumbrunn. Think of it as a tune up and a chance to identify places for incremental improvement. We can all benefit from pausing to think about the big questions and how they affect our writing lives, particularly when doing so may convert into greater productivity, efficiency, and—yes—enjoyment when it comes to scholarly writing.

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NOTES

1. Joli Jensen, *Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

2. Jensen, *Write No Matter What*, 113.

3. If not necessarily intuitive, Wymann’s suggestion is at least remarkably sensible. For empirical evidence of the efficacy of such instructions, see Roger M.A. Yallop and Djuddah A.J. Leijen, ‘Using Author-Devised Cover Letters Instead of Instructor-Devised Rubrics to Generate Useful Written Peer Feedback Comments,’ *Journal of Academic Writing* 11, no. 1 (2021): 16–44.

4. The TL;DR summaries feel right at home in a rather irreverent book such as this one.

5. In this single photograph, readers note the remarkable number of projects Zumbrunn has in process at one time, underscoring a point Wymann makes: A sequential approach to writing projects is likely to be inefficient. Invoking Robert Boice, Wymann shares how having multiple projects at various stages increases the chances for ‘cross-fertilization of ideas.’ Boice, however, recommends working on just two or three writing projects simultaneously (manageable for scholarly writers with less experience); Zumbrunn apparently has quite a party under way. See Robert Boice, *Professors as Writers: A Self-Help Guide to Productive Writing* (Stillwater, OK: New Forums, 1990), 81.