

# Do something different- navigating the writing process during a time of stress

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## Abstract

Sarah Jones completed the Master's in Modern and Contemporary Literature in 2017 at the University of East Anglia (UEA), where Zoë Jones is a Learning Enhancement Tutor. They worked together as tutor and tutee over several months, meeting regularly while Sarah was working on her master's dissertation. Sarah found the process of writing the dissertation stressful to the point of needing to intercalate. Once Sarah had returned to the University to complete her dissertation, she explored a range of creative and innovative techniques with Zoë for producing the necessary writing to complete her course. The result was that Sarah was able to submit a piece of work of which she felt proud. In this collaborative paper, Sarah and Zoë share their reflections on the work they did together and give insights into some of their successes. This case study will be of interest to anyone looking for ways of renewing their engagement with their writing, or to tutors or academics working with students during periods of difficulty.

**Key words:** creativity; writing process; wellbeing; stress

## Introduction

This case study is a collaborative reflection on a collaborative learning process, co-authored by a former master's student (Sarah) and Learning Enhancement Tutor (Zoë) from a mainstream University in the East of England. Sarah and Zoë look back on the experience of working together to find strategies to help Sarah to re-engage and remain engaged with her course during the process of writing her master's dissertation. The structure of this piece reflects the conversational nature and 'alongside-ness' of the creative and innovative techniques that were crucial to Sarah's sustained engagement with her course. Sarah's voice is presented here in *italics*, and gives a first-person account of the experience from a student's perspective. Zoë's voice is presented in Arial, and details the experience of a tutor.

## Sarah

*I really struggled to articulate the problems I was having with my mental health because they did not make sense to me. I was incredibly privileged as a master's student – I'd received partial funding from my University to help with tuition fees, I had a good part-*

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*time job, and the unwavering support of friends, family, and University staff. Moreover, I was a very high-achieving student: I'd graduated at the top of my class as an undergraduate and was averaging grades of 78% at master's level.*

*This was a complete disconnect from how I was feeling at the time. Retrospectively, what I was experiencing was 'the imposter phenomenon', as first defined by Clance and Imes (1978). I thoroughly believed that my previous academic achievements were built on pillars of luck and trickery, and I was undeserving of my place on the MA and the funding I'd received. This made it increasingly difficult to engage with the course, as I was chronically afraid of being 'outed' in seminar discussions and in my writing, and revealed to be ill-informed, inconsiderate and lazy.*

*At the time, I understood this to be a mix of stress and paralysing writer's block. When I called the Student Support Centre and explained I was worried about my mental health and writing, they referred me on to the Learning Enhancement Team. At first I was confused, as I thought this was a service exclusively for students with specific learning difficulties, or for students studying non-essayistic subjects who were suddenly faced with dissertations. I didn't think I could find help with my writing from someone who wasn't an expert in my academic field, but I was desperate. And that's when I met Zoë.*

### **Zoe**

I was so pleased that Sarah was correctly referred to my team. There is a widely held misconception about who tutors like me can support, but many of the students who come to see us are high achievers, like Sarah. A number of factors might impact a student's ability to fully engage in their course, factors related to academic study itself and external to it (Houghton & Anderson, 2017). In Sarah's case, striving to succeed academically while developing her identity as "an emerging scholar-writer" (Badenhorst, 2018, p.120) had led to paralysing writing anxiety (Badenhorst, 2018; Huerta, Goodson, Beigi & Chlup, 2016). Postgraduate students in particular need to navigate a range of complex cognitive activities as they turn their reading and thinking into writing (Badenhorst, Moloney, Rosales & Dyer, 2016). Fortunately, once Sarah had sought help, she seemed to find our tutorials beneficial. It was a pleasure to work with a student who was so passionate about her subject and clearly very able, although I was aware that, as she says, she was struggling. As the deadline for her dissertation approached, the strain that Sarah was under was telling. After a difficult tutorial I emailed her to acknowledge this and offer reassurance.

### **Sarah** replied:

*I know all of the strategies, I know my argument, I want to complete the project more than anything, and the fact that I am still struggling this hard to get things written, and that it is all making me this upset and feel this unwell, leads me to think that there's a much bigger wellbeing/mental health issue that I am struggling with. I don't want to be too hasty in this, but I am considering applying for an intercalation. (Email from SJ to ZJ, August 2016)*

## **Zoe**

While Sarah was dealing with a range of issues, my role was to focus on ways that she could engage with her writing. As far as this was concerned, she seemed to be stuck, in an agonising state of “liminality” (Meyer & Land, 2006, p.22), as she wrestled with complex and creative ideas. She intercalated for six months. Once she returned we resumed our regular tutorials. Our quest was to work together to find reliable techniques for managing the writing process that would allow moments of “illumination” to arise from all of Sarah’s “preparation” and “incubation” (Pang, 2017, pp. 47- 49; Wallas, 1926, outlined in Sadler-Smith, 2015, pp. 345- 6), without this process becoming unbearable or unmanageable. To achieve this, we explored techniques that contained elements of creativity and innovation. With hindsight, these techniques (walking tutorials; using pictures and shapes; cutting up her text) were successful because they allowed us to talk about “the specifics of writing practices” (Murray, 2015, p. 2), not often discussed with students. Below we explore why we think the creative and collaborative approach we took enabled Sarah to complete her dissertation while also attending to her wellbeing, an essential balance needed for successful academic study (Aked, Marks, Cordon & Thompson, 2008; Houghton & Anderson, 2017).

## **Let’s take a walk**

### **Sarah**

*Walking was probably the most surprising thing Zoë suggested we try. We’d planned a route around the campus which started in the big open area by the lake, then wove slowly towards the more built up areas of campus and ended back in the busier center. We’d planned some key questions for Zoe to ask me on the walk - starting with open, thought-provoking questions while we were in the open landscape and then progressing to more structured questions about the essay as we walked through the buildings.*

### **Zoe**

Sarah was the first student with whom I had tried this. My colleague, Nonia Williams, and I had developed a process for delivering walking tutorials. As both Nonia and I like to be active, helping students develop their writing outside the confines of the Student Support Centre where we work, was something we felt could benefit us, as well as them. We were mindful of the benefits that physical activity can bring for wellbeing (Aked et al., 2008) and were keen to acknowledge the body-mind connection in the writing process (Clughen, 2014). (See Jones & Williams, 2018, for more detail about the walking tutorials and embodied writing support). Knowing Sarah enjoyed being active (often arriving for tutorials with a yoga mat tucked under her arm), I was curious to discover whether walking could benefit her writing as it had writers such as Plato, Rousseau, Wordsworth and Wolf (Coverley, 2012). Having read about the effects of walking on brain activity (Aspinall, Mavros, Coyne & Roe, 2015) and on the development of creative thought (Oppezzo & Schwartz, 2014; Pang, 2017; Wallas, 1926, outlined in Sadler-Smith, 2015) I believed that there was a good chance it would.

## **Sarah**

*At the start of the walk I was quite self-conscious - walking around felt disconcerting when I was used to looking at Zoë while we were talking in her office. However, after a few minutes I started to relax, and after a while I found myself talking a lot more than I normally would in our tutorials. There was something about walking with Zoë alongside me that felt really different. In Zoë's office I'd often get stuck trying to explain what I was writing about and the problems I was having - sometimes I'd feel quite defensive about this, as though I was in a tutorial with a lecturer. However, when we were shoulder-to-shoulder walking, rather than face-to-face in an office, I found myself talking in a much freer way - rather than defending what little work I'd done, I started thinking through new material out loud. A lot of it was rambling, but because I concentrated less on what I thought I should be saying, and I wasn't worried I'd have to write anything down (I'd left my bag, notebook and pens in Zoë's office), I was actually thinking in a much broader way than I normally would. When we inevitably got back towards the buildings on campus, and Zoë started to ask me to think about ways in which I could use these thoughts to structure essay questions, I found the questions a lot more approachable.*

## **Zoe**

I also noticed that Sarah was able to discuss her writing more freely while walking alongside me. This 'walking alongside' is noteworthy: in a keynote speech, John Hilsdon (2018) stated that a fundamental part of learning development is the ability to work alongside students. Working alongside students equalises power relationships, thereby giving learning developers, like me, the opportunity to enhance students' understanding of institutional expectations (Hilsdon, 2018). For me, the connection between 'working alongside' and 'walking alongside' students, is a powerful one.

It is interesting that Sarah felt her thinking was "broadened" by the experience of walking. A connection can be made to Sword's (2017, p. 167) assertion that academic writers need to "find their happy penguins", to connect positively to the writing process. One way to do this, she insinuates, is to include physical activity, such as walking, into the writing process. Sword (2017) draws on Fredrickson's (1998) broaden-and-build model which suggests that positive emotions prompt individuals "to pursue a wider range of thoughts and actions than is typical" (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005, p. 314). Walking with Sarah benefitted me too: I felt better able to focus in on the detail of what she was speaking to me about. As a non-expert in her subject area this was particularly helpful. Perhaps this perceived benefit could be attributed to the 'walking alongside' aspect of the tutorial, or having temporarily escaped my own 'stuck place' (being sedentary in a small space). For both of us the walking tutorial seemed to be a positive, freeing experience.

## **Sarah**

*After we got back to the office I wrote as quickly as I could. All the pressure to make something perfect before I wrote it down had vanished - I was focused on capturing the rough structure of my thinking and any new links I'd made. It was verbal sketching more than writing.*

## **Zoe**

It was satisfying to see Sarah freewriting to prompts after our walk. She was animated and purposeful, but also not fixated on producing polished text. Oppizzo and Schwartz (2014) have found that walking can give rise to creative thinking, and that this effect can be detected even after returning to sitting (p.1145). They suggest walking can be used successfully before brainstorming, which could explain the renewed energy Sarah seemed to have found for her writing. In some way the walking seemed to have helped Sarah to get to the point of “giving”, being kind to herself (Aked et al., 2008, p. 10), by allowing herself to write messily in the freewriting task. My observation was that by “removing the pressure to write ‘correctly’” (Bean & Elbow, 2009, p.18), walking followed by freewriting helped Sarah to “focus on clarifying and developing” (p.18) her ideas. The walking certainly seemed to help Sarah to re-engage with her writing; this could have been due to the walking itself, the “alongside” conversation it afforded, the novelty of trying a different approach, or perhaps the combination of all of these factors.

## **Things begin to take shape**

While walking was a technique that we had not tried before Sarah’s intercalation, we also returned to something that she had previously found helpful: using pictures and diagrams to explore the potential ‘shape’ of writing.

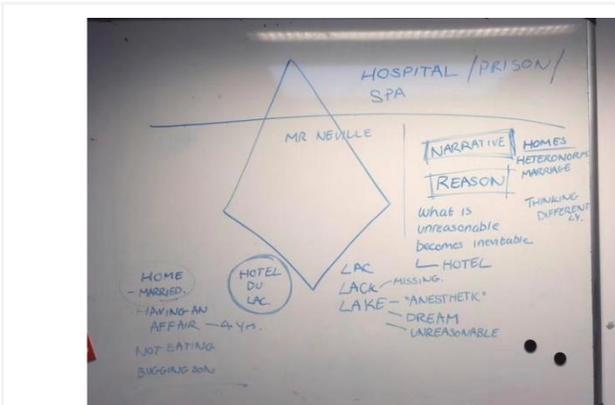
## **Sarah**

*Writing to shapes was interesting to me - a lot of my academic essays looked at objects within literature, and literature as space or objects, and it really made me wonder why I had never considered my own writing in this way.*

## **Zoe**

Being asked to visualise and explain the shape of her writing was a novel experience for Sarah, as it is for many students. I have a set of cards and a poster in my room that display fifteen different ‘shapes’- diagrams and photos- that I use to ask students to think about the “shape” of their writing. Prompted by these pictures, students can use the idea of shape to think about how to focus in on certain points, or the amount of space certain ideas might occupy in their writing. Examples of the shapes can be seen in the Appendix, and more detail about how they were developed and might be used can be found in Jones and Williams (2018). Figure 1 below shows the plan for one of the chapters of her dissertation which Sarah drew on my whiteboard during a tutorial. Tentative at first, she seemed to gain momentum as she talked and sketched out the shape of the chapter by adapting one of the images on my cards. My impression was that the process of drawing, talking and thinking about what shape her writing could be allowed her to gain control and thus become re-engaged with her work.





**Figure 1** Sarah's chapter plan using an adapted shape from Zoe's cards

### Sarah

*A large part of my issue with writing was that I could always second-guess whatever I wrote - I could always think up a counter argument, or refute what I'd said. The diamond / kite shape became really helpful as it had a 'broad' section, where I felt like here is the moment to address everything else, and then began to taper to a point, where I could see that I'd made the and here is my thinking leap in my writing. It sounds silly looking back on it, but I was so bogged down in thinking and then refuting, and thinking and refuting, that I'd never see my argument progressing to a point. So the kite became the perfect shape for my work, where I could begin with something small, an enticing snippet, broaden that to the general context of my work, then progressively taper the argument to a distilled 'point'. This challenged the way I'd previously thought of my essays as 'building' towards something - I'd always think this needs to be broader. But with a kite, I could see that it was the opposite. I could narrow, distill, I could point to exactly one thing. Therefore, I think X.*

### Zoe

Sarah describes a shift in her thinking about the writing process. Having a range of shapes to choose from seemed to give her the idea that there were many possibilities for the way she might structure her writing, not one perfect paradigm she was seeking to replicate. This shift freed up her thinking about her writing, in line with literature that advocates the use of images or diagrams to both facilitate discussion and prepare students for writing (Badenhorst et al., 2016; Buckley & Waring, 2013; Hyerle, 2008; Wellington, Bathmaker, Hunt, McCulloch & Sikes, 2005). Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield (2018) advocate drawing as a beneficial pre-writing task, and this certainly seemed to help Sarah. I felt using 'shape' enabled me to guide Sarah through the difficult 'incubation' of complex ideas towards the 'illumination' of feeling satisfied that she had found a way to fit them together (Wallas, 1926, outlined in Sadler-Smith, 2015). Sarah was able to be in the moment, "taking notice" (Aked et al., 2008, p.8) of her own thought

processes as she annotated the shape on my board. She seemed to achieve a state of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) which was "highly enjoyable, motivating and self-actualising" (Badenhorst et al., 2016, p. 340). This was an important step towards being able to produce exciting, creative thinking that would translate into highly competent, original writing.

## **The final cut**

### **Sarah**

*Approaching the dissertation for the second time, there was a part of me that was petrified that I'd just end up as sick as I was the first time I'd attempted it - and this really intensified towards the dissertation deadline.*

### **Zoe**

While some of the techniques we had been using in tutorials had quietened Sarah's 'inner critical voice'" (Badenhorst, 2018, p. 112), as her deadline approached that voice became louder and harsher once more. She arrived for our final tutorial in a slightly agitated state, unhappy with the content of one her chapters.

### **Sarah**

*I couldn't seem to finish the final chapter I was working on, and I was losing confidence that I could make it over the final hurdle after all.*

### **Zoe**

Most of our work up to this point had been on the writing process, but it was now time to focus on the product; to find some ways that she could enhance her text to a standard with which she was pleased. I fell back on some techniques I had used with other students: text-mapping (Middlebrook, n.d.) and something I call 'cut and paste', similar to that advocated by Ballenger (2009, p. 231). I encourage students to "attack their draft" (Ballenger, 2009, p. 230) with scissors, label it with post-it notes and move, annotate or discard sections, paragraphs or sentences. To add both a sense of drama and of novelty, I took Sarah's draft chapter to another room in the building, a larger room with a bigger table, which she had not been in before. I spread her single-sided 'text-scroll' (Middlebrook, n.d.) onto the table and invited Sarah in to meet her chapter.

### **Sarah**

*I was a little surprised when Zoë suggested that we left her office and went into a larger room to "attack the essay with scissors", and this brought me back into the present. Coming face-to-face with the printed-out chapter made me realise how much I'd done already (all the paper! All the words!) and allowed me to see the essay as a material thing I could touch, pick up, turn around, move. I began chopping the essay into 'building blocks' - wherever there was a break or a leap I wasn't quite making, I cut it free of the rest. This allowed me to move the blocks of words across the table, to*

*identify words which weren't working. Zoë then helped me to annotate the draft in colourful markers - adding bullet points to bridge the gaps between points, or highlighting bits which would need rephrasing to come earlier or later in the chapter. It took us a lot of time, but it was worth the effort. The conversation we had while we were chopping was about how logic is sustained over a longer text - how it needs to hold together differently than a 5,000-word piece. I left with a bag full of (numbered) scraps of paper and feeling like I could finish the piece.*

## **Zoe**

Even at this late stage in the writing process, going into a different space and using these techniques allowed Sarah to “take notice” (Aked et al., 2008, p. 8) of her draft; she was able to have fresh perspective, akin to the “beginner’s mind” of Zen Buddhism (Mlodinow, 2018, p.169). Cutting up her draft and “experimenting with its basic architecture” (Ballenger 2009, p. 233) freed up her thinking and allowed Sarah to find new ways of improving her work. Sarah remarks on the conversation we had while attacking her work. It is noteworthy that all of the techniques we have described in this case study incorporate conversation as a way of clarifying thinking. Elbow (2012) underlines the usefulness of everyday language for this purpose, describing a listener as playing “the midwife” to a writer’s ideas thereby allowing them to “Spit it out. Hit the nail on the head” (p.91). The space provided by a learning development tutorial, outside of the student’s discipline, on neutral territory, seems particularly apt for this purpose. Sarah seemed to leave the session with renewed energy and, I hoped, the sense of purpose needed for the final push to complete her work and submit it in time to meet her deadline. It was with great delight that I opened this email from Sarah on the morning after her deadline:

## **Sarah**

*I know it's super late and I am really sorry but I just had to tell you that I just finished my dissertation! AHH! I don't even know if it's any good, but it's done and I am so so so so happy. (Email from SJ to ZJ, September 2017)*

## **Conclusion**

*The techniques that Zoe and I developed in our sessions became absolutely essential for my academic work. Where I previously felt paralysed in the face of writing, I found I now had an arsenal of frameworks I could use to approach difficult sections. Though the academic support I received at the University was brilliant, for me, having someone else I could work with on my writing processes was vital. The collaborative work Zoë and I completed helped me to re-engage with my course, and the techniques I learnt meant I remained engaged.*

## **Zoe**

It was a privilege to work and walk alongside Sarah as she completed her journey as a master’s student. Sarah’s case shows that even the most able students can struggle from time to time; that studying at university level is necessarily complex, and at times

can be unsettling (Houghton & Anderson, 2017). Being able to respond to the complexity and challenge that academic writing can entail by offering Sarah a range of techniques for “getting the writing done” (Thomson, 2016, paragraph 7), and her willingness to try different things was key to our collaboration. One of the most interesting aspects of my work as a Learning Enhancement Tutor is the opportunity this role presents me to “keep learning” (Aked et al., 2008, p. 9). Here we have shown how creativity, innovation and flexibility can be vital for students experiencing difficulty with completing the writing necessary for their courses. Importantly, by using techniques that may also enhance our wellbeing, students and staff alike can find ways to thrive.

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## Appendix

### Examples from “What shape is your writing?” cards

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