

WRITING WORKSHOP STUDENT GUIDE SERIES

Mindfulness for Long Writing Projects

Why Bring Mindfulness into Your Writing Practice?

Long writing projects, such as senior projects and theses, come with their own unique writing problems—and they also include long hours of sitting, periodic brain fog or fatigue, and a sense of anxiety and of being overwhelmed. These mindfulness tools can help you with the emotional-physical side of the process.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the process of bringing your attention to the present moment and trying to release judgment (a.k.a. practicing acceptance of things as they are). A mindful writing process:

- helps reduce stress and anxiety held in the body, particularly from sitting long hours.
- clears the mind, which can open up new angles on writing problems or difficult tasks.
- helps you achieve and sustain focus.
- encourages you to be more creative.

Key Tools for Developing a Mindful Writing Practice

1 Setting an Intention

Begin a period of writing sitting up straight in your chair, both feet on the floor, with your palms placed gently in your lap, facing up. Close your eyes and take three deep breaths: breathe the air first into your chest, and then into your belly, and imagine it spreading outward to your toes and fingers. Then exhale, drawing it out of your belly and your chest. After you release the third breath, continue breathing normally and set an intention for your practice. An intention can be two-fold. It may be to write a certain number of pages or to fix the structure of a chapter. Or it may be a bigger intention, such as, “I want to find a way to enjoy this process.” Whatever it is, *be specific with your goal*. Repeat this exercise when you move on to the next goal or if you lose track of your goal.

2 Regular Movement

When writing for long periods, it's important to regularly stand up and stretch, make tea, or take a walk. A good rule of thumb is to get up once an hour for about 10 minutes. It's easy to think these interruptions will hurt your thinking or writing flow, but in reality, our brains are a part of our bodies and attending to the body can help bring more focus and clear thinking to your work.

Stretching/chair yoga is also a good activity to do during such breaks. Try the popular [Yoga with Adriene](#) on YouTube.

3 Basic Breathing Techniques

Diaphragm breathing:

This is one of the most basic breaths and even a few rounds can begin to calm you. Sitting straight or lying down, place one hand on the upper belly, just below the rib cage, and one hand on the chest. Breathe deep into the belly, filling it up and feeling your hands rise. Then breathe out from your belly, feeling your hands fall as you clear your body of air. Repeat.

Alternate nostril breathing (Nadi Shodhana Pranayama):

This breathing technique is a little trickier to get the hang of, but once you do, it's great for when you're feeling particularly stressed. Place your right thumb on your right nostril and your ring-finger on your left nostril. Your pointer and middle finger can either rest on your forehead or curl in against your hand. Your pinky can stay out. This shape is illustrated below. Block your right nostril with your thumb and breathe in through your left. At the top, block your left nostril and breathe out through your right. Then breathe in through your right, keeping the left nostril blocked, and at the top, block your right nostril and unblock your left, breathing out through the left. Repeat, as if you are making an upside-down U shape with the flow of your breath, back and forth. Check out [this video](#) to see this breath in action.



Ujjayi breath:

This breath is a constricted breath common in yoga flows and is the hardest to explain. The idea is that you breathe in and out with a constriction in the back of your throat. On the out-breath, it's almost like you are fogging a mirror, a long "haa," but with the mouth closed. Check out [this video](#) to hear the sound.

4 Meditations

If you are new to meditation, start small. Try the following exercises for short spurts whenever you feel anxious, stressed, sad, frustrated, or angry. You can do them in the middle of a crowded room or while walking. The main idea is to slow the body down and help you be present in the moment.

- Follow your breath in and out (do it until you feel a shift in your energy).
- Lay on the ground and do a body scan: close your eyes and move your attention from your toes throughout each part of your body up to your head and fingers, just noticing what you feel. You can also tense the muscle areas and wiggle your joints and then relax them (e.g. curl your toes, flex your feet, and move up your body).
- Try to sense everything around you (eyes closed): what are the things you can hear, smell, taste, or feel?
- Finally, guided meditations on apps, YouTube, Spotify, and other online spaces are sometimes useful. Here is a guided 15-minute anxiety meditation from [Yoga with Adriene](#).

5 Creative Visualizations

These guided creative visualizations are adapted with writers in mind. They can foster the creative process and help focus and calm the mind. Dr. Tess Bird, who put together this document, has created a few meditations that are available on her website at www.tessbird.com/media.

And finally, you may also want to check out [Mindfulness at Wesleyan!](#)

This document was compiled by Dr. Tess Bird, an anthropologist of health, wellbeing, and uncertainty management, and the Mellon Fellow for Writing in the Social Sciences at the Shapiro Center for Writing (2018-2020). You can learn more about her work at www.tessbird.com.