

Speaker 1 ([00:05](#)):

Hi everyone, and welcome to this episode of LungFit. On today's episode, I'd like to talk about something that's on the mind of most people involved in research, whether you're a professor or a postdoc, or a grad student, or actually anyone involved in healthcare, where you have to create reports or other types of documents. And that topic is how to make time for your writing and how to get it done. It's something that most of us struggle with, but sometimes it's not something that we admit or we talk about with others. One of the things I've done in my job is actually host workshops and retreats on academic writing. I don't pretend to be a superstar writer or a super productive person. I've got a reasonable number of publications, of course, but that isn't what drives me to talk about this subject. I've been drawn to it because when I was a grad student and early career researcher, it was like no one ever talked about productivity or about writer's block or , about time management.

Speaker 1 ([01:03](#)):

And so when I found resources that finally helped me, it was like, ah, it's not just me! Other people have struggles too!! And so I wanted to both share what I had learned with others and also build up a bit of a community for myself of others who like to think about their professional roles and writing and other topics related to being a productive, but not miserable academic. And so these workshops and retreats were born and I put them on at conferences and universities, and I was actually about to host a weeklong retreat when Covid hit. I haven't done any virtual ones, but maybe that'll be an option in the future. And you know, they were so much fun. (As an aside, send me a message if you'd like one for your institution). They're really great. You learn so much. I learned so much by hosting them.

Speaker 1 ([01:03](#)):

New Speaker ([01:03](#)):

New Speaker ([02:01](#)):

on what I've learned and also what I've tried over the years. You know, we talk about understanding more about your perspective of writing, figuring out what's holding you back, setting goals, and also trying out different writing strategies, which I really loved. Now, a few of these, you really do need to learn them in a workshop or a retreat setting, but I thought on this episode, I would share a few suggestions that I give in these workshops. So let's get started. The first thing that I like to talk about is just understanding why we write. If you're a clinician, you know, you're writing in your progress notes or your patient charts, or you're writing discharge letters to communicate to other healthcare professionals. And also, of course, to track your patient's progress.

Speaker 1 ([02:50](#)):

If you're a researcher, you're also writing a lot of things like proposals and research papers and teaching materials and books. But the odd thing is that our writing work is often pushed to the side with other things taking priority. This might not happen as much with our clinical writing, but having said that, I do know clinicians who talk about being behind in their charting. So it happens there too. But one thing that doesn't seem to be really clearly acknowledged in academic writing, and by that I mean writing our papers or books for publication, is that writing is part of our job, and it's as much a part of our job as teaching, being on committees, writing grant proposals, supervising students, marking papers, all of

those other things we do that take up our time. So why, despite it being part of our job, do we push it aside?

Speaker 1 ([03:48](#)):

And, you know, what makes this decision about pushing it aside even crazier is that having papers or books published is the currency by which many of our positions are valued. And it's often the primary indication that we are productive, which is important if you wanna keep your position. But of course, you know, the thing that sets this responsibility of writing apart from our clinical and teaching and service responsibilities, and also even grant writing obligations, is the lack of deadline. We don't have the same kind of deadlines in writing our papers and our books as some of the other deadlines that occur in our clinical or teaching or service spaces. And that lack of deadline for a lot of people means that it gets pushed aside. And, you know, then we kind of kid ourselves by thinking, we'll be able to get to it. We'll catch up on everything else.

Speaker 1 ([04:44](#)):

We'll find time on our calendars for like a really big writing push. But in reality, we have lots and barriers and myths about our writing that I think we kind of need to confront if we want to make our writing the priority that it is. So I'd like to touch briefly on some of these and also offer you a few suggestions for addressing them. You know, in a workshop or retreat. We really go into these in a lot of detail and we try all sorts of interesting strategies that really won't work here. But I'd like to share some of them with you to get you thinking, you know, perhaps you have some of these barriers and you haven't really even realized it yet. So when I work on the retreat or the workshop activities, I really like to use some of the myths that were raised in a really great book by Paul Sylvia called "How to Write a Lot".

Speaker 1 ([05:38](#)):

And if you don't have this book and you need to write a lot and you just wanna simple focused, kind of fun, practical approach, just go out and buy this book. It's really small, it's not very expensive, it's probably even in your library. I think it's just well worth it because for me, he really put on paper a lot of the stuff that I was thinking in my head. And so some of these suggestions that I'm gonna provide are based on addressing several myths about writing that he describes in his book. And I'll put a link to the book in the show notes.

Speaker 1 ([06:16](#)):

So he has five myths, and the first one is I have to be ready to write. The second is I have to read more before I can write. The third is, I don't have enough time to write. The fourth is I have to do all my research before I can write. And the fifth is my drafts need to be really good quality before I feel that I can even send them out. So the last one is less about the writing, but more about just getting it out and actually submitting it. So let's just go through these briefly and I'll throw out a few suggestions that you can think about when it comes to addressing these myths and trying to write more. So the first two are kind of go hand in hand. It's, I have to be ready to write and I have to read more before I can write.

Speaker 1 ([07:07](#)):

So I'm gonna tackle those first. So the, I have to be ready to write, you know, this is the, I have to be in the mood. I have to sort of, you know, get myself ready. Everything has to be perfect. My desk has to be totally clean. It all has to be, you know, in this perfect way. And if I don't feel like I'm in the mood or I'm, I have to be ready, then I just can't do it. And I would suggest that you might wanna think about this in a

different way. Writing the actual act of writing, even for just a short period of time, will often be the thing that makes you feel ready, not the other way around. And so for those of you that really get stuck about the blank page, and I really have to be in this mood, you can do something that's less formal, like free writing.

Speaker 1 ([07:54](#)):

And so what's free writing? Well, it's really just a warmup for your writing session. It's just a way to clear your head, clarify your thoughts. It's not really meant to be shared. You just are going to put your fingers on the keyboard and you're just gonna start writing. And so you might find that easy to do, but for a lot of us, even that act of just writing, like, what am I supposed to write? So you can use prompts to help you get going. And so your prompts could be something like, uh, about your paper, your project, you might just write to yourself, my paper, my project is about whatever, or the stage that I am at today is whatever. Or what I'm interested in finding out is whatever, are the things I'm looking for help with, or I need further resources are whatever. And so just the act of answering these kind of questions or using these sorts of prompts can just get you in the writing mood.

Speaker 1 ([08:55](#)):

And you'll find if this is helpful to you, you'll find that you just start to get into the typing. You start to have your brain into the writing mode. And this is kind of like a little push and then all of a sudden away you go. So it's helpful for people that face that page and they are just stuck. They don't know what to do. Using little prompts like this can be really helpful in just getting you moving forward. Now, another thing that you can think about trying addresses, really that second myth, which was, I have to read more before I can write. And you know, if you're this person, you're the person that you have stacks of papers everywhere, every paper leads to another paper. You kind of go down the rabbit hole of having too many papers, and you just feel like I have to keep reading.

Speaker 1 ([09:48](#)):

I don't know enough about it. I don't understand it. I don't, I have to read, read, read, read, read more before I could ever possibly have anything to say myself. And I would suggest that you could actually turn it around and look at this in a different way. And writing, using writing as part of your reading is a super helpful way to start getting the words on the page. It'll actually help you make sense of your reading, so you're not just reading, but it allows you to actually understand what you are reading. And if you've ever heard of things called smart notes, they talk about this a lot. Like using the act of taking notes about what you're reading to help propel your understanding as well as your writing. And that's because just simply reading something, it doesn't really get anywhere in our brain. It doesn't really help us foster new ideas or think about the connections with our work so we can just sort of read it and then it just kind of is in our brain.

Speaker 1 ([10:49](#)):

And then we read the next one and we may or may not remember the first thing that we read. And so there can be this sense of, I'm reading and reading, I'm reading, but I don't feel like I understand. And so using your writing to help you make sense of your reading is a great way to get words on the page. And sometimes you end up using some of that writing in your actual paper. So how would this work? Well, you might have a paper that you're reading and you are going to sit down and you've got the paper beside you, and you could even, you could even do it as you read the paper. So you might start by

writing, you know, the main purpose of this paper was, or the main finding was, I would encourage you to actually type these things out.

Speaker 1 ([11:34](#)):

Or if you're a freehand writer, actually write them out. Don't cut and paste from the PDF and act like that's you writing. Just typing it out can be helpful. But you don't want these kinds of writing to just be a summary or a kind of a cut and paste of what it is that you're reading. Think about answering questions or prompts like- this paper was interesting to me because, or I would like to learn more about this subject or this thing or this method because blah, blah, blah. Or maybe you disagree, I disagreed with this approach because, or to incorporate this paper in my own work, I need to clarify, whatever. So you can see that you can use your reading and if you tend to use reading as a bit of a procrastination tool for writing, you can actually be reading and writing.

Speaker 1 ([12:31](#)):

Now, the things that you write might not be what you need to write for your paper, but they're helping you make sense of the reading and they're getting you into this writing mode. And you may actually find that the things that you write about while you're reading a paper are things that are gonna enter your own writing. Like maybe part of your discussion where you're starting to think about how, what you're learning in your research, how you need to make that connection with the literature. So this strategy is a way to get you writing more, to get you reading in a meaningful way, and also to hopefully not keep with the reading, reading, reading before you feel like you can start writing.

Speaker 1 ([13:14](#)):

Now the third idea is you know, looking at that you don't have enough time to write. And this is probably the most popular of the myths that he describes. And we all feel this, right? We all feel we don't have enough time to write. And there isn't really an easy way around us. A lot of us have big teaching loads, or we have a large, you know, clinical caseload, or we're doing lots of different projects at the same time. Everybody has the same amount of time in a day and where you're putting your priorities really up to you. And there may be some times where you have to have other things take precedent. But the reality is, is that you still need to get this writing done and it's still your job and you have to find time for it the same way that you find time to teach and you don't say, you know, oh, I can't go and teach today because I need to do something else.

Speaker 1 ([14:09](#)):

No, you show up, you show up for clinic, you show up for your teaching, you show up for meetings. You need to also show up for your writing. And that is finding time to write. So you know, what is it that we need to do? We need to actually schedule time for your writing in your calendar. And I know everybody, you know, you've probably heard this before and I'll just add to that, but if, if you think you're just going to find the time and you find writing kind of hard to do anyway, which a lot of us do, then it's gonna be the thing that you'll always, you know, find something else to do. You're not going to want to do this writing unless you have it in your calendar, and then you're making a more deliberate, you know, walk away from your writing if you ignore it in your calendar.

Speaker 1 ([14:53](#)):

But it's not gonna happen magically unless you schedule a time. And another thing that you can do is to use something called "poms", which I'm gonna talk about in a sec. So when you put things in your

calendar, it really does help you be a bit more accountable. And there's a number of different you know, approaches to this. Some people feel like you need to write every day. There is some benefits to that because you get some momentum. Some people feel like if you just schedule it in there, that's better than nothing. You might have to schedule even a huge block if that's how you perform better -you don't do well in little snippets, but really you do need to get it in your calendar and find a way that works for you and find a time that works for you. If you're an early morning writer, then don't schedule your writing for weekends or for evenings when you're already too tired.

Speaker 1 ([15:45](#)):

So getting that in your calendar and then visualizing, saying no when someone tries to book you in that time. Remember, you do that when you're teaching or if you have a clinical if you have a clinical job, you quite easily say, I'm sorry, I can't come to that meeting, I'm teaching, and nobody would ever disagree with you. And so you need to do that as well with your writing. You need to find a way to say that you're already booked for a particular time and that you can't do that other thing because your job depends on it. And it's crazy that we neglect the thing that's gonna keep us in our jobs so it's super important for you to protect that time. Now the other thing I mentioned was doing these "poms" which is also known as a Pomodoro. And you may have heard of this before, a Pomodoro is Italian for the word tomato.

Speaker 1 ([16:39](#)):

And so if you're of a certain age, you may remember these little tomato kitchen timers that we would see on the top of your stove. They look like a little tomato and you just crank them and the timer goes around. And so over time, doing a pomodoro meant doing a block of writing. And then at the end of the time when the timer goes off, you take a physical break, which just means getting up, just going get a glass of water, just walking away from it just for a few minutes. And then you can do another pomodoro. And there's something about this focused writing for a short period of time where you make an attempt -you don't look at your email, don't have other distractions, you just get some writing done and then that timer goes off and you get the break. And I actually use Pomodoros for anything that I find mentally, you know, quite a challenge.

Speaker 1 ([17:30](#)):

So sometimes marking papers or writing, you know, reading proposals, things like that can be quite a lot of mental heavy work. And so I'll schedule a pomodoro and say, okay, I'm gonna do this for 20 minutes. I'm gonna do this for 10 minutes, sometimes even five minutes, just a short bit of focus time, and then I'll get a break. So it's very handy to use your timer, and be able to, you know, keep track a bit about your writing and then also make sure that you get these breaks and you can keep track of it. I have a colleague that I sometimes will say, Hey, I did three poms today and it's a way to be accountable.

Speaker 1 ([18:12](#)):

Now the next thing I wanna talk about is basically looking at, let me find that last myth. I have to do my research before I can write. Uh, not really. I know people will say this, and you know, there's always something to write. If you're doing research where you're collecting data, have you written up the paper for the introduction? Have you written up the methods? Probably these things were part of proposals or ethics applications. Some of this writing might already be done. And so you can start to pull that information in. You can start to create the blank tables for your table 1. You can start to pull together some of the research and summarizing it that will help you with your discussion. So this idea that no writing happens until all of the research, data collection and analysis is done is just not true.

Speaker 1 ([19:03](#)):

There's always something that you can do. And then the last one I wanna touch on are my drafts need to be good quality before I feel they're ready to be seen. And this one's hard. This one's really hard because it's a little bit of our perfectionism, right? You know, I would suggest that maybe you think of it a different way. One, writing regularly will improve the quality of your work. So already just getting more into the habit of writing will make you a more confident writer and a better writer. The next thing is, you know, some writing we need to keep to ourselves. It's probably not great, but maybe other writing that you do would actually benefit from early feedback. So if you have a trusted colleague who's maybe at the same stage of career or, and enough of you know, in the same kind of topic area that you're in, maybe you could get some focus feedback on early writing that's still rough.

Speaker 1 ([20:01](#)):

And I would suggest that you don't need a detailed critique. Maybe you could ask them, what's the one thing in this paper so far that's unclear? Or what are three sort of points that you think that I need to focus my attention on? So you don't need anyone to go in there with the red pen and start doing major revisions, you know, it's messy. But maybe you can share a section and say, just give me one thing that you think is unclear, and I just wanna reinforce that really no one is perfectly happy with their work. You just learn to let it go and move on because you have to get it out and so you can't keep worrying about it and fussing about it. And another way to sort of address all of these myths and especially that, that last one with that, you know, accountability and the quality is to think about having more people in your life who are like your writing supports and your accountability supports.

Speaker 1 ([21:00](#)):

So if you do have that trusted colleague that you can share the draft with, that's great. Maybe, you know, there's other ways that you can be accountable to one another like, you know, talk about what you're gonna do for the next writing week that you have and have that sort of accountability. And I think I will probably have a whole separate podcast that talks about accountability and ways that we're keep accountable to ourselves as well as, you know, having maybe an external system so that we keep on track with our writing. So that's a bit of a longer podcast and oftentimes when I talk about these kinds of topics, they will be longer. But I hope that you have thought a little bit about your writing as I've been talking, and if you found yourself believing any of the myths that I talked about, maybe thinking about some strategies that will help you confront them.

Speaker 1 ([21:54](#)):

They really are myths to writing. And I really thank Paul Sylvia for I guess exposing them as not being true. There are ways around them, there are ways that you're thinking about your writing that might be getting in your way. And if you can get outta your way a little bit, then you may find that you can attack and address your writing in a way that's a lot more, I guess, productive for you, but also gratifying for you. You know, you are good at what you do, you have a story to tell, or an important message to send the rest of us, and you just really need to get your paper out. So I hope that this has been helpful to you. Please feel free to touch base with me, look at the resources that I've put in the show notes, and good luck with your writing. We're all in it together. Take care and we'll see you on the next episode. Bye for now.