

Basic Principles of Efficacy

Following are the ten fundamental rules of efficacy that proved most effective in helping chronic, problem procrastinators manage comfort and fluency compared to matched controls. Each rule was accompanied in the study with detailed strategies for practice and assessment (Boice, 1995a; 1995b); here I greatly abbreviate the rules.

1. *Wait.* Waiting helps writers (and teachers) develop patience and direction for writing by tempering rushing. Its exercises include methods for calming, slowing, and noticing before and during starts. At first glance, this rule seems at odds with the second.

2. *Begin before feeling ready.* The second rule coaches writers in systematic ways of finding imagination and confidence; writers practice regular bouts of collecting, filing, rearranging, and outlining ideas while making sure they solve the right problem and have the right materials and plans at hand. Neither efficacy nor its rewards, including happiness, just happen; they must be prepared for and cultivated (Csikszentmihalyi, 1994). The second rule, incidentally, is often mastered before the first; there is no necessary chronology or separation in these admonitions.

3. *Work in brief, daily sessions.* Writers are advised to work regularly at prewriting, at writing, and at additional things easily procrastinated and blocked. But the rule also means maintaining a regular habit of brief sessions that will persist because it does not supplant other important activities. Its strategies include contingency management (but only in the short run, until a habit of regular work is established; writers perform better with intrinsic motivation). A distinctive quality of productive, creative people is that each day they return to their desks (Gardner, 1993).

4. *Stop.* Stopping means halting in timely fashion, when breaks are needed or when enough has been done for the day. It means moving on from writing to other things including rest. This most difficult rule is practiced by means of planned breaks, by stopping early (often in the midst of tasks), and with external reminders (for example, social cues, such as a prearranged phone call from a friend about when to stop).

5. *Balance preliminaries with writing.* Writers practice the balance rule by scheduling periods of delay before moving from preliminaries to actual writing. They make clear, manageable plans for collecting, organizing, and conceptual outlining—in a way that ensures as much time spent on these preliminaries as on writing.

6. *Supplant self-defeating thinking and habits.* The sixth rule is about moderating the pessimistic, self-denigrating thoughts that lead to depression and inaction or overreaction (Seligman, 1991). It is also about changing habits that otherwise incline writers to shyness, suspiciousness, and related self-defeating behaviors (Baumeister & Scher, 1988). At its most complex, it teaches ways of making the private bets that discourage impulsiveness, by requiring a price for impetuous acts of

procrastinating and blocking. When these bets are made well, they recast the penalty for defaulting as too expensive to permit indulgence in escape behaviors—those immediately rewarding acts that tempt us to be disobedient and self-defeating (Ainslie, 1975; Logue, 1994). Other exercises include (a) habitual monitoring for negative talk about the self and for maladaptive styles of working and (b) practice of rational-emotive therapies to defuse and redirect irrational thinking in and around sessions.

7. *Manage emotions.* The seventh rule, like the sixth, is about self-control but more about the emotional side of writing. In particular it means monitoring for and moderating the hypomania that can make writing rushed and superficial. It means working at a moderate pace punctuated by occasional bursts of excitement and accent that energize but do not prevent returning to unhurried gaits of working, that do not induce enduring depression (Boice, 1994). The resulting patterns of variability in pacing and emotional emphasis resemble what Carl Rogers identified as “focused voice” in his pioneering observations of expert therapists (Hill & Corbett, 1993).

8. *Moderate attachments and reactions.* The rule about moderation reflects the finding, in composition research, that successful writers tend to be less attached to their writing, especially in its formative stages. Their detachment allows more revision and more benefit from critics; it makes inevitable criticism less devastating. Writers in the treatment program are coached to notice when they are reluctant to stop during sessions, when they feel their early plans and drafts are already brilliant, when they are unwilling to share unfinished work because its ideas may be stolen.

9. *Let others, even critics, do some of the work.* The penultimate rule requires even more letting go, delegating, collaborating. It leads to regularly scheduled sharing of work and soliciting constructive praise and criticism. It engages writers in role-played approximations to socially skilled ways of handling and learning from criticism (for example, “Yes, I can see how someone might react that way . . .”).

10. *Limit wasted effort.* Because this last rule, about not wasting efforts, comes late in the year-long program, when writers are beginning to work on their own, its practices are somewhat idiosyncratic. It nonetheless has a common theme, one originating in the finding that resilience in writing relies most heavily on ways of working with minimal wasted effort. Its exercises focus on monitoring for inefficiencies, notably impatience (for example, rushing work until fatigue sets in) and intolerance (for example, overreacting to an interruption or criticism).

Boice, R. (1995a). Developing teaching, then writing amongst new faculty. *Research in Higher Education*, 36, 415–456.

Boice, R. (1995b). Writerly rules for teachers. *Journal of Higher Education*, 66, 32–60.