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Kathryn Roulston

University of Georgia, roulston@uga.edu

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Abstract

As long as there have been writers, they have given advice to others on writing. Numerous academic and non-academic writers have contributed advice on how to create a writing life, how to write well, and how to get published. Much of this literature aims to assist writers through the challenges encountered in the writing process. Helen Sword's book, *Writing with Pleasure*, takes an atypical approach to writing by showing readers how they can create their own action plan to write with pleasure. Suited to novice and experienced writers, Sword's book provides practical strategies for creating and sustaining a writing practice characterized by more pleasure than pain.

Keywords

academic writing, writing life, writing advice

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Writing with Pleasure: A Review

Kathryn Roulston
University of Georgia, USA

As long as there have been writers, they have given advice to others on writing. Numerous academic and non-academic writers have contributed advice on how to create a writing life, how to write well, and how to get published. Much of this literature aims to assist writers through the challenges encountered in the writing process. Helen Sword's book, *Writing with Pleasure*, takes an atypical approach to writing by showing readers how they can create their own action plan to write with pleasure. Suited to novice and experienced writers, Sword's book provides practical strategies for creating and sustaining a writing practice characterized by more pleasure than pain.

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As lore on writing would have it, writing involves much drudgery, isolation, and pain. Many years ago, when I read Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life* (Dillard, 1989), I was struck by her dedication to writing – demonstrated by sitting in a solitary beach-side cabin facing the wall, so she would not be distracted by the ocean view outside. For many years, I've practiced something akin to this approach to writing – sitting at a table in front of a computer, adhering to writing deadlines – through sunshine and rain I've mostly attempted to ignore whatever was going on outside and elsewhere in order to *stay focused and write!* Although from an early age I enjoyed writing, my approach to writing professionally has mostly followed an austere route – that of practicing daily writing as much as possible and avoiding side journeys and diversions at all costs. Likewise, much of the advice literature on the craft of writing attends to the challenges: writer's block, fear of critique, lack of ideas, and finding and making time to write. Just look at the title of one recently published and much praised book by Stephen Marche, *On Writing and Failure: Or, On the Peculiar Perseverance Required to Endure the Life of a Writer*. I confess that I have not read this book, it may well be more inspiring than the title suggests. Still, much less has been written about how to develop a joyful writing practice.

And it is joy in writing that is the topic of Helen Sword's latest book, *Writing with Pleasure* (2023). In this book Sword deliberately moves away from academic formatting and prose to invite both academic and non-academic writers to think about their writing practices and how to engage joyfully in the process. Throughout *Writing with Pleasure* there are playful illustrations by Selina Tusitala Marsh, sometimes accompanied by poems. In contrast to those of us confined by the strictures of APA 7th edition formatting, rather than using formal citation practices throughout the book, Sword uses endnotes at the back of the book. These identify original sources, after which she includes short sections labelled "Bibliophilia." In these, readers can explore other writing on topics discussed. For example, for the endnotes to Chapter 10, entitled, *Island Time*, Sword suggests readings for how to take a break. These include books on rest, writers' retreats, memoirs of retreat and renewal, or suggestions for reading a poem. This reminded me of one of my own practices that I have, regrettably, long ago abandoned – visiting an art gallery for inspiration.

The book is organized in two parts: Part One, The SPACE of writing, discusses social, physical, aesthetic, creative, and emotional principles involved in writing. Part Two, The

SPACE of pleasures, discusses analog tools, digital tools, processes, identities, and balance. And lest the headers for these parts seem somewhat dry, Sword introduces metaphorical ways to think about the writing process into the chapter titles. For Part Two, these are:

6. On the ground: Analog tools
7. In the sky: Digital tools
8. Wind, river, stone: Processes
9. Star navigation: Identities
10. Island time: Balance

Sword has been conducting research on writing for many years, as is evidenced in her earlier book, *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write* (2017). In *Writing with Pleasure*, each chapter is liberally laced with excerpts from writers all over the world who have participated in Sword's research and workshops. Details provided in the "Behind the mirror" section inform readers that the writers quoted are aged from 21-60+, come from all over the world – although predominantly North America, Australia, New Zealand (where Sword makes her home), and Europe. Students, early, mid, and senior career academic writers are represented almost equally across the social sciences, sciences, and arts and humanities. Since two-thirds of the participants were women, I wondered whether women were more likely to seek help with writing; perhaps this is a research question for someone to pursue.

Sword's focus in this book is clearly to inspire writers of all types to enliven their writing practices in ways that generate pleasure. She states in the introduction her "audacious aim: to recuperate pleasure as a legitimate, indeed crucial, writing-related emotion" (p. 3). To that end, each of the ten chapters closes with a "pleasure prompt" that invites readers to "stop reading and start writing" (p. xv). She encourages readers to create a Pleasure Notebook in whatever shape or form cultivates joy. As one example, the pleasure prompt for the chapter on analog tools suggests that readers do as follows:

Free write, mind map, or experiment with different ways of using *analog tools* to bring more pleasure to your writing. practice – starting with your Writing with Pleasure notebook itself. For example, you could create a collage of inspiring visual images that remind you what you want your writing practice to look and feel like, or use colored pencils and Post-it notes to add comments to past entries, or get out some fluorescent highlighters and mark up recurrent themes. The more you work, play, and mess around with analog tools, the more creative and adventurous your writing will become. (pp. 150-151)

Sword reveals late in the book her love of color and uses the metaphor of the "mosaic" for how she envisions the book as a whole. If you purchase a hard copy of the book, you'll find it is bright pink with a purple and green dust jacket with the title encompassed by golden doodles: colorful indeed! Far from being a dusty tome that you are likely to relegate to your shelf of unread books, *Writing with Pleasure* is a joy to read. I did not, as Sword suggested, complete the writing prompts throughout the book; I still need to do that. However, Sword invited me to think about all aspects of my writing, my most enjoyable writing tasks, and what I can do to create and re-create pleasure in writing. There are numerous ideas to ponder.

This book provides an antidote to the ubiquitous "writing as challenge" literature available. It is well-suited to new and experienced writers of all ages, both academic and non-academic. Sword, as in her other books (Sword, 2007, 2012), provides practical, concrete strategies that can be used to instill pleasure in the writing process. And for those scholars working in academic settings, Sword offers encouragement. Although Helen Sword is now

professor emeritus at the University of Auckland and might not be pressed to produce publications like researchers working in frequently underfunded institutions of higher education, this does not mean she is unaware of the challenges faced by academic staff. Clearly, Sword has realistic understandings of what is entailed in the writing life in contemporary higher education settings. In the afterword to the book, she notes that,

writers' top-scoring pet peeves were *time* (as in *lack of time* or *time pressure*), *email*, *getting started*, and *responding to peer review*. Other commonly disliked tasks including *structuring*, *editing*, *writing a literature review*, and *conforming to academic conventions and expectations*. Nothing I have written here can make these tasks less challenging. (p. 252, italics in original)

What Sword hopes to offer is “creative strategies for approaching your own most disliked writing tasks with greater pleasure – or at least with a diminished sense of dread” (p. 252). For anyone hoping to develop an action plan to instill, develop, or re-create pleasure in writing, start with this book. Perhaps *Writing with Pleasure* will provide the encouragement you have been looking for, or the inspiration you did not realize you needed. Helen Sword's books on writing have been influential on how I think about writing, and this most recent contribution is no exception. Who wants to write with pleasure? I do. What about you?

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Author's Note

Kathryn Roulston (ORCID: 0000-0002-9429-2694) is professor in the qualitative research program at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia, where she teaches qualitative research methods. Her research interests include qualitative research methods, qualitative interviewing, and analyses of talk-in-interaction. She is author of *Interviewing: A Guide to Theory and Practice* (2022), co-author of *Exploring the Archives: A Beginner's Guide for Qualitative Researchers* (with Kathleen deMarrais), and editor of *Quests for Questioners: Inventive Approaches to Qualitative Interviewers* (2023) and *Interactional Studies of Qualitative Research Interviews* (2019). Please direct correspondence to roulston@uga.edu.

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