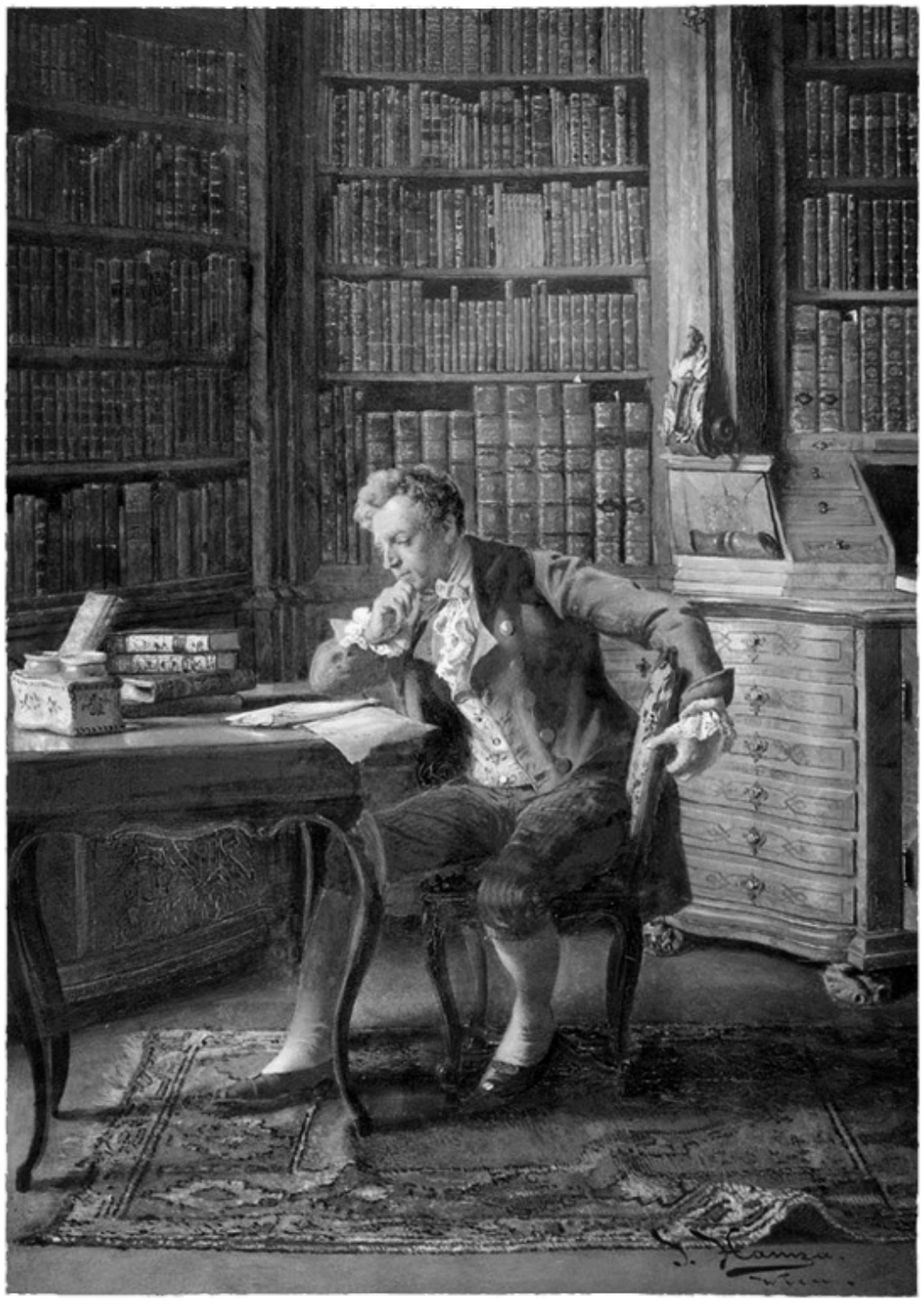


The Art of Academia

Some practical tips and tricks on life as an academic:

- Writing for peer review
- Giving research talks
- Lecturing
- Using group work in class
- Reading strategies
- How to prioritise ‘deep work’
- Thinking about your career

Created by **John Danaher**, ***Philosophical Disquisitions***. For more see: https://philosophicaldisquisitions.blogspot.com/

Advice on Writing for Peer Review

Perspective

How to approach it with the right frame of mind.

(**1) Don't lose sight of why:** It is easy to get trapped in the 'game' of publishing, constantly trying to increase your number of publications, but publishing isn't an end in itself. Remember that you are doing it because you are intrinsically fascinated in the subject matter and because it will help you to achieve other ends (academic impact, career progression etc.).

(**2) Prepare for failure**: The average article is rejected. You are probably not above average. The important thing is to prepare for this and frame it in a positive way. Aim to be the most rejected author in your department/peer group. If you are being rejected, at least you are trying.

(**3) Don't fetishise failure**: Don't assume you can learn too much from your failures. Sometimes you can, but most of the time failure is overdetermined. The review process is somewhat arbitrary and the stated reasons for rejection rarely overlap. Be persistent. I have resubmitted pieces to as many as 4-5 different journals.

Process

How to handle the submission and reviewing process

(**4) Have at least 3-4 target journals:** This follows from the need for persistence. Don't be too attached to one target journal and don't write specifically for them (the one exception to this is if you are writing a response piece — see sidebar).

(5) Be meticulous in responding to reviewers: If you are lucky enough to be asked for revisions, be sure to take the process seriously. Respond to everything and pinpoint exactly where in the manuscript you have addressed the reviewers' concerns in your response document.

(6) Be courteous in responding to reviewers: Reviewers have egos; they want to be flattered. They will think they have made good criticisms of your article. You should agree and thank them for their thoughtful and incisive comments (etc.). Obsequiousness is in order.

(**7) Pick your battles**: Sometimes reviewers will say things with which you fundamentally disagree. You will need to stand your ground on these points, but be sure to make concessions to them in other ways to soften the blow.

Promotion

How to get more from your publication

(**8**) **Remember that it doesn't end with publication**: If you want people to read what you have published, if you want to achieve academic and social impact, if you want to engage the public in your research, you will need promote and publicise you work in other ways.

Fast-tracking?

Response pieces - Writing an article that specifically responds to another article that appears in the same journal is often a good way to get your first publication, but has its limitations. There is a more limited target audience and it is unlikely to achieve long-term impact.

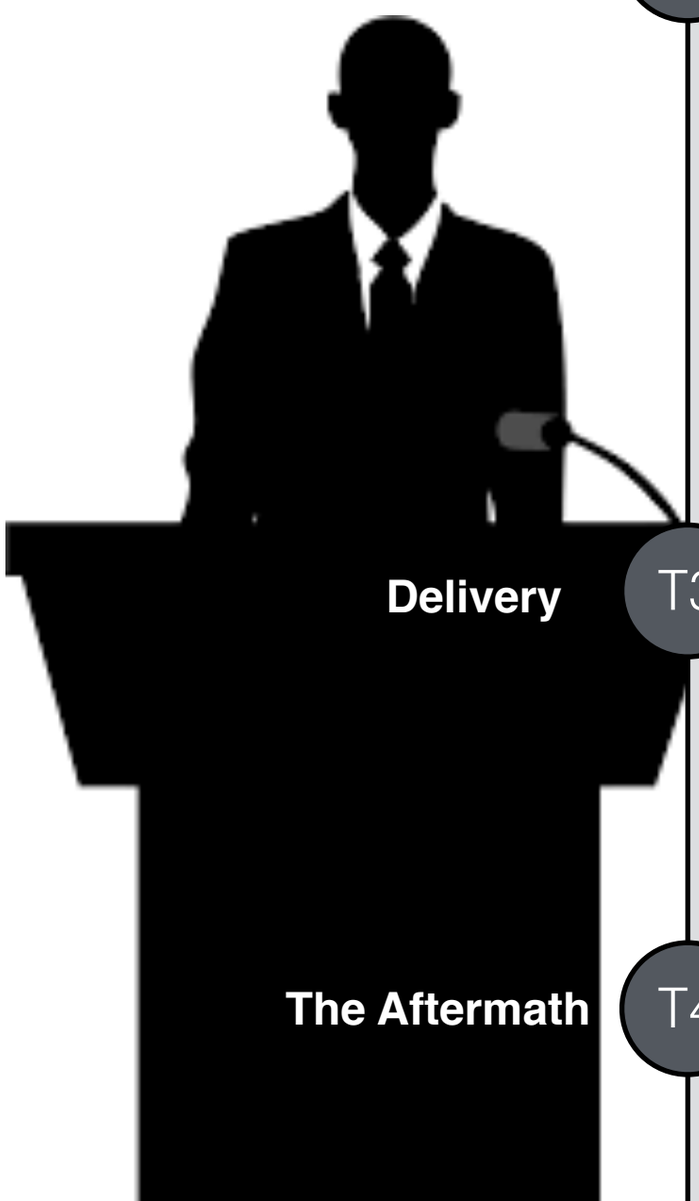
Collaborations - Collaborations are a good way to fast-track a publication, provided you collaborate with the right people. I recommend finding people who are more productive and ambitious than you, with whom you share certain interests. If you ask them to collaborate on a piece they will be far more likely to help you than if you asked them for feedback on something you have already written, and they will push you outside your comfort zone.

Suggested Resources

Wendy Belcher, *Writing your journal article in 12 weeks* (London: Sage, 2009)

Paul Silvia, *How to Write a Lot* (American Psychological Association, 2007)

How to Give an Academic Research Talk



The Invite

T1

Don’t over-leverage yourself: Don't accept too many invitations to give too many talks. Only agree to do as many as you feel able to do to the best of your ability.

Limit expectations: Don't expect too much. Don’t be surprised if no one attends, or seems to care about what you have said.

Focus on the process not the outcomes: Before accepting ask yourself whether you will enjoy the process of preparing and delivering the talk.

Preparation

T2

Write it out and learn your speed limits: Figure out how many words you say per minute and write out a talk that fits within your agreed time limit. Use this script to shape the content.

Build an Enticing and Transparent Structure: (i) Build rapport at the outset using interesting stories/ questions; (ii) include memorable moments within the structure of the talk; and (iii) be provocative/ interesting not comprehensive.

Remember Less is More, Particularly with Visuals: Cut about a third from your first draft; only use visuals that genuinely complement and enhance what you are saying.

Rehearse and Refine: Read the talk out loud, find the beats and points of emphasis, learn it off, and then perform it multiple times before delivering it. (This is the one thing you should do to improve the quality of your talks).

Delivery

T3

Dealing with nerves: Give a lot of talks - it gets easier with repetition. Remember you are a natural talker in everyday conversation.

Don't forget the importance of stage presence: Occupy the stage comfortably; cut out nervous tics and habits.

Commit to what you are saying: don’t second guess yourself; trust your preparation.

Stick to the time limit: Rehearse your talk and make sure you know it fits within the allotted time.

The Aftermath

T4

Be polite: Be grateful if people want to ask questions and engage with what you said; attend other people’s talks and participate in them.

Review and refine: Reflect on how it went; try to identify & learn from mistakes. (Maybe build an act?)

The Art of Lecturing

Largely culled from James Lang *On Course* (Harvard University Press 2010), with some personal additions (John Danaher).

1 Cultivate the right attitude

A commonly-held view maintains that lectures are ineffective and anachronistic exercises in information transfer. But there is value to them. They can:

- Summarise the **latest research**
- **Synthesise** and compare large bodies of information
- **Translate** and explain concepts and theories to particular audiences
- Allow you to present yourself as an intellectual model for students - **inspire them**
- Help the lecturer become more knowledgeable

2 Organise the content

Lecturers must be well-organised. You need to provide students with a framework for engaging with the subject:

- **Less is more** - aim for 3-5 concepts per lecture. Repeat and emphasise them throughout.
- Adopt some **coherent overarching structure**, e.g. a series of questions, a story, an argument
- Remember that **attention spans are short**, build in variations and alterations in the lecture, e.g. question breaks, class exercises, actual pauses to allow students to catch up.

3 Manage the Performance

Remember that lecturing is a physical and visual performance, not just an intellectual one. Master the physical and visual aspects:

- Craft your **persona**: what character are you playing?
- Learn how to **land your energy** in the classroom
- Use **movement** and **gesture** to signify shifts and points of emphasis
- Use the **right vocal emphasis,** e.g. put the emphasis at the end of your sentences: build to a crescendo, don't fade away.
- Use **visuals** and **multimedia** to complement the performance (the Lessig method as an extreme example)
- But be cautious with powerpoint - students will want to take everything down!

4 Engage the students

Lecturing should not be purely unilateral. Students should engage with the material:

- You should encourage students to **take notes**: to summarise and explain the material to themselves as they go along.
- Build-in **discussion moments** - pose a big question, get students to discuss, then solicit responses and pose follow-up questions
- Use **demonstrations** - works well in scientific disciplines; some social psychology examples too
- Use the **peer instruction model** - pose conceptual tests - get students to think alone, then answer and explain in groups - test their knowledge and understanding to identify difficulties with the material.

Informal Group Work in Class

Why would you bother?

Many lecturers dislike creating group work exercises because they themselves used to dislike such exercises as students. This may be because most academics prefer to learn via independent reading and writing (I know I did). But there are some reasons for doing it:

(1) Students will be expected to work collaboratively in their future careers; very few jobs do not involve this.

(2) Studies suggest that students who learn collaboratively retain knowledge for longer and give higher feedback ratings.

(3) The reality is that knowledge is not foundational. There isn't some static body of facts waiting to be transferred into the students' minds. Knowledge emerges from a consensus of peers (this is true of mathematical and scientific knowledge). In-class group work encourages students to develop this consensus-approach to knowledge acquisition.

A. Develop the Task

Develop a **concrete task** which requires the students to produce a **definite output** within the allotted time (usually 20-30 mins in class). The definite output might be a piece of writing/diagram etc.

Any question or task that might be assigned as homework (or for tutorial work) can be modified for in-class group work. Examples include:

Identifying/evaluating the premises and conclusion of an argument in a piece of prose

Mapping the relationship between characters in a novel

Identifying the issues in a legal problem question

B. Form the Groups

Once you have developed the task, you need to assign it to groups to work on. There are various theories about the ideal way to form groups. Some favour an explicit policy of diversity. This might be appropriate for *formal group work*. But for informal, in-class groups you probably don't need to be too fussy. Some methods include:

Pairing - Get students to work with the person sitting next to them.

Number lottery - Go through each row of students, assigning them a number (1, 2, 3...etc) then get those assigned the same number to group together.

Keep groups relatively small for in-class work, **maximum 4-5 students.**

C. Manage the Groups

Once they start working, you need to keep the students on task. Don't intervene too early. Give the students a chance to get to grips with the task first. Be prepared to deal with the following problems:

Silent groups - Jump-start them with questions.

Silent group members - Get them to reengage by asking for their opinion or assigning them to be official group recorders.

Off track groups - Hovering is often sufficient to bring them back on track.

Fast groups - some groups may finish the task early. You can deal with this by building in extensions to the task.

D. Process and Feedback

To make the task valuable, you need to have some method for processing the outputs and providing feedback. Here are some possibilities:

Reports - Get the groups to report back to everyone else (warning: this can be time-consuming in large groups).

Pump-priming - Use the group task as way to prime the pump for a general class discussion, i.e. students develop potential contributions through the group task, then spontaneously contribute to the discussion.

Follow-up exercise - Extend the group work with a follow up question/exercise for further in-class discussion or post-class homework.

The Art of Reading - Reasons, Strategies and Tactics

(1) Reading Purposes

Pleasure, *i.e.* for the pure subjective enjoyment of reading a narrative or following an argument

Understanding/insight, *i.e.* to learn something new, acquire a new perspective, or figure out how something works.

Fuel for the imagination, *i.e.* to spot patterns in and combine different ideas, concepts and arguments.

(2) Reading Strategies

Broad Brush - To cover a lot of material in a relatively short time, to get a general sense of the arguments and ideas presented in the text.

Deep Dive - To cover a narrow range of material over an extended period of time, to understand and critically engage with ideas and arguments presented in the text.

(3) Reading Tactics

Broad Brush Tactics

Adopt a *consistent* and *diverse* reading habit.

Dog-ear important pages, *pause for reflection*, write *chapter summaries* or *personal indexes*

Reinforce by *listening to podcasts* or *watching videos* in which the author discusses the main ideas

Deep Dive Tactics

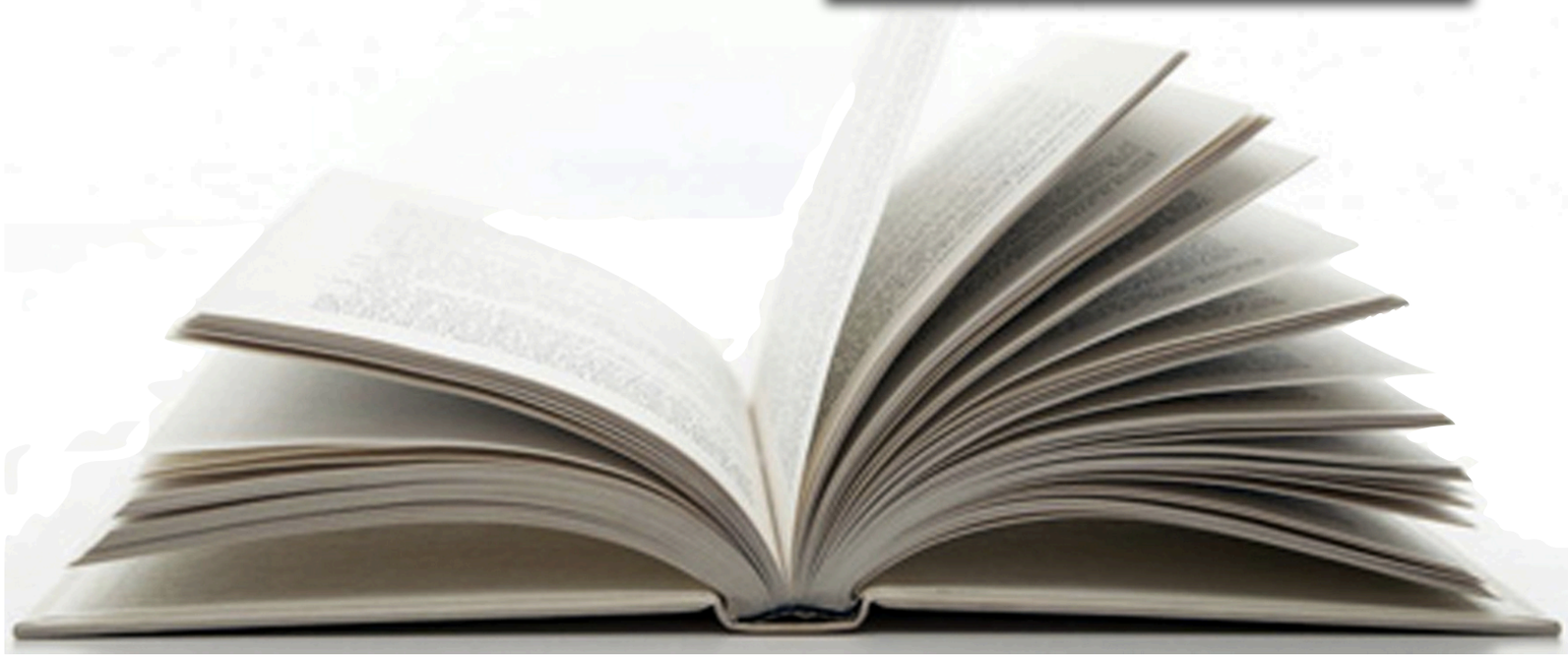
Again adopt a *consistent* and *diverse* reading habit.

Use extensive *annotations* both *summarising* and posing critical questions:

- Hard copy: summarise in margins, draw argument diagrams, draw flow charts etc.

- Digital copy: use **Papers** (or equivalent) to store and annotate PDFs.

Reinforce by writing blogpost summaries, allowing ideas to percolate, and revisiting annotated copies.



The Value of Reading Fiction (from *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, de Boton 1997)

1 To feel at home everywhere

Reading about different times and different places, and seeing similarities between the experiences of the people described and our own experiences (or between their personalities and personalities with which we are familiar) will expand the range of places in which we feel at home. In short, it makes the world a more comfortable place.

2 A cure for loneliness

Seeing ourselves (our reactions, our emotions, our beliefs) described in fictional characters will make us feel a little less alone in the world. People often think they are more unusual, idiosyncratic and eccentric than they really are; fiction enables them to see this.

3 The finger placing ability

Fiction often describes people, places and things more accurately and more articulately than we could ever manage. In short, in enables us to place our fingers on the things we have been trying to say. This expands and sharpens the mental framework we bring to the understanding of the world.

The Value of Deep Work and How to Prioritise It

1 Develop your depth philosophy

How will you incorporate deep work into your life?

(i) *Monastic philosophy* - cut yourself off from the world and do nothing but deep work.
(ii) *Bimodal philosophy* - alternate back and forth between periods of monasticism and engagement.
(iii) *Rhythmic philosophy* - make deep work a daily habit
(iv) *Journalistic philosophy* - do deep work whenever you can

2 Ritualise the process

Adopt a ritual that addresses three questions:

(i) Where will you work and for how long?
(ii) How will you work once you start working?
(iii) How will you support that work? (e.g. rewards, breaks etc)

3 Make grand gestures

If you find it difficult to start deep work, then make some costly commitment that forces you to do it, e.g. renting or building a special workspace.

4 Don't work alone

Adopt a 'hub and spoke' model to your worklife. Engage in deep work in the spokes, in relative isolation, but enter the hub on occasion for serendipitous, mutual collaboration. When appropriate, engage in deep work with compatible others.

5 Execute Effectively

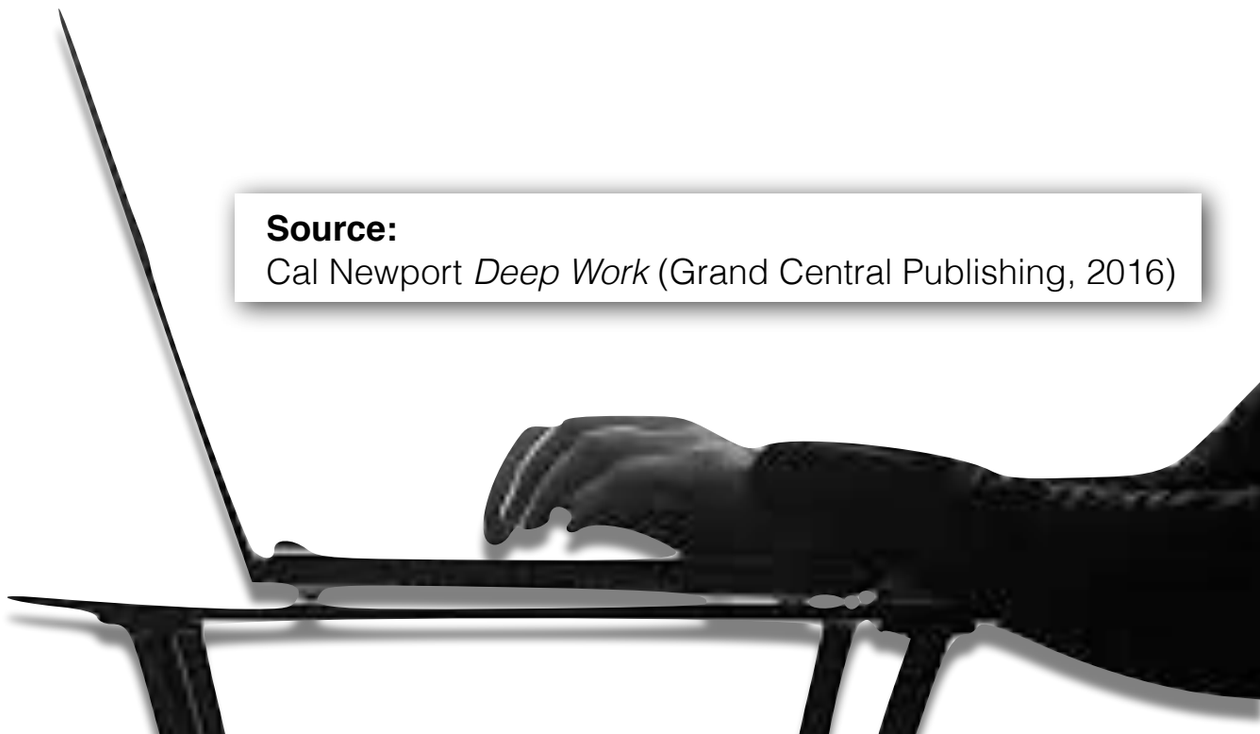
Understand the difference between what you need to do and how you are going to do it:

(i) Focus on what's important (80/20 heuristic)
(ii) Act on *lead* measures, not *lag* measures (i.e. on what will get you to where you want to be, not on where you want to be)
(iii) Keep a compelling record of achievements
(iv) Create a cadence, i.e. regular rhythm of meetings for accountability to yourself and others.

6 Be lazy

Appreciate the value of switching off. It enables insight; allows you to recharge; and avoids low-value work.

Adopt a daily shutdown ritual that eases any anxiety about switching off, e.g. review the day's tasks; final email check; write out a task list for the next day.



Source:
Cal Newport *Deep Work* (Grand Central Publishing, 2016)

Dennett's Advice to Philosophers (from *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking*, Penguin Allen Lane 2013)

1 Appreciate the faustian dilemma

Why do people specialise in particular philosophical problems? Consider the following choices:

1. *You solve your chosen philosophical problem(s) and so the field closes down forever and you become a footnote in history*

2. *You write something thought-provoking and sophisticated that doesn't resolve anything stays on the assigned reading lists for centuries*

Many philosophers would choose the second option, but why? (There is a similar dilemma for scientists)

2 Be a sophisticated auto-anthropologist

A lot of philosophy is a form of auto-anthropology. That is, an attempt to understand concepts and ideas by thinking carefully about them from a first-person perspective.

Some auto-anthropological projects are valuable (e.g. attempts to axiomatise folk understandings of the world). But some people mistake the auto-anthropology for the truth. They are naive naive auto-anthropologists. They assume their practice can get at the truth.

But auto-anthropology should be treated as a defeasible starting point; it should be *sophisticated* and open to *counter-intuitive discoveries*

3 Avoid dedicating yourself to higher order truths of chmess

Philosophy is largely an *a priori* discipline. It involves clarifying and working out the implications of various conceptual frameworks. But some of these *a priori* inquiries are more valuable than others.

Chess is a deep, socially important artifact. It is also an *a priori* game. The possible moves and possible plays all follow from its constitutive rules. You could spend a lifetime working out the *a priori* truths of chess.

Chmess is another game, similar to chess, but with one difference: the king can move 2 squares in any direction, not just 1.

There are many *a priori* truths of chmess. You could spend your life working them out, but the game does not have the same history and value as chess.

The danger is that much philosophical inquiry could end up being like working out the higher order truths of chmess instead of chess. A new, faddish, conceptual framework is established and a community of scholars dedicates themselves to exploring it, even though it lacks value.

You can avoid this by employing an *outsider's test for philosophical value*. Can you explain it to the uninitiated? Do they get it?