

# Time to Write: A necessity, not a nicety

Rosie Wadman<sup>1</sup>, Jess Macpherson<sup>2</sup>

Centre for Higher Education Practice, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Southampton, UK

Correspondence: <sup>1</sup>[r.a.wadman@soton.ac.uk](mailto:r.a.wadman@soton.ac.uk), <sup>2</sup>[j.r.macpherson@soton.ac.uk](mailto:j.r.macpherson@soton.ac.uk)

ORCID: <sup>1</sup>[0000-0003-1362-1327](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1362-1327), <sup>2</sup>[0009-0005-5377-1698](https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5377-1698)

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## Abstract

*In this critical reflection we will explore our Time to Write project, providing a brief overview of our work, followed by discussion of expected and unexpected benefits, and the knowledge and skills leveraged in design and delivery. We also consider the remaining challenges as our funding from the UKRI Enhancing Research Culture allocation ends in July 2025 and we move to a 'business as usual' model.*

**Keywords:** writing; equity & inclusion

## Introduction

Time to Write (T2W) has its roots in the Power Hour of Writing series (**Zihm & Reid-Mackie, 2021**) that we initiated following a review of the university's staff researcher development programme in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. We noticed both an increased pressure on academic writing time due to unbalanced workloads and lack of connection resulting from working from home. Rooted in collegiate, social approaches, the design of sessions and delivery provide opportunities for participants to develop positive writing habits and explore different methods of protecting time, as well as supporting the legitimisation of writing as part of the academic working day (**Murray & Newton, 2009; Sword, 2017; Zihm & Reid-Mackie, 2021**).

The Power Hour combines short, structured, and protected periods of writing time with opportunities for connection with the wider academic community. Any member of staff with academic writing tasks to complete (whether researcher, academic, technician or professional) is welcome to attend, and the community now numbers over 270. Each 90-minute session starts with 10 minutes of goal setting before we switch off our mics and cameras for an hour of concentrated writing time, followed by an informal discussion of both progress and setbacks at the end. Power Hour has become a valued space of friendly and non-judgemental connection, with a core of regulars who attend every week, and many more who drop in and out as needed throughout the year. Sessions require minimal facilitation and admin resource, and we work with a small group of volunteer hosts to provide three sessions a week at different times.

The Power Hour community quickly started to request further support in the form of organised writing retreats, and the UKRI Enhancing Research Culture fund provided an opportunity to both meet the immediate need for longer stretches of protected time and look beyond, supporting the wider growth of a positive, inclusive writing culture. We adapted Rowena Murray's structured approach to retreats and social writing spaces (**Murray & Newton, 2009; Murray, 2015**) to design retreat spaces that complement the ethos of our Power Hours, as well as reserving a significant portion of our funding to support colleagues across the university to run their own writing retreats. Our retreats run over one or two days, with a mixture of on and off campus venues. They are designed to flex around the needs of participants, whilst maintaining clear expectations of commitment. For example, retreats are always programmed during the working week and participants with caring responsibilities or accessibility needs are invited to discuss them with us to ensure they can attend comfortably. The design of the retreats support writer wellbeing, development of healthy writing habits, and a positive

relationship with writing, as well as providing time to write (**Murray, 2015; Murray & Newton, 2009; Sword, 2017**). The purposeful provision of different lengths of protected time, both online and in person, supports the differing needs among writing community (**Sword, 2017**).

The T2W project has been warmly received by participants. Feedback has shown that the project has created a sense of community, increased feelings of wellbeing and an improved ability to complete academic outputs. The regularity of the retreats has enabled participants to weave their writing through the year, with several reporting that they have completed writing projects solely using power hours and retreat time. The largest demographic of staff attending the writing retreats are mid-career women. These were the outcomes that we expected and planned for, reflecting wider findings in the literature about the ability of writing retreats to: support equity and inclusion to research, enhance belonging, and increase wellbeing (**Grant, 2006; Kent et al., 2017; Murray, 2015**). We also planned from the beginning to support wider activity through formal channels, contacting associate deans and heads of research to offer support with organising retreats at faculty and school level.

However, we had not foreseen the depth of benefit to women, particularly those with caring responsibilities and how this need would initiate independent replications of the project across the university, as female academics took our approach to protected time back to their departments. We also realised that our approach to facilitation and the skills involved in creating and communicating welcoming, inclusive spaces are major contributors to impact of T2W. Supporting this replicated, widened delivery became one of our priorities and has taken multiple forms, including coaching on design and facilitation skills, building a bank of shared information and resources to aid the organisation of retreats and other forms of protected time, hosting a 'meta retreat' to share skills and knowledge between facilitators, and finally, forming an ongoing community of practice to provide support and share learning.

### **Expected and Unexpected Benefits Around Wellbeing, Inclusion, and Equity**

When designing the Time to Write project we were primarily aiming to provide protected time in the working week and support people to form healthy writing habits. Writing is an intrinsic part of academic life that is often a casualty of high workloads and conflicting priorities, particularly when balancing teaching and research (**Westoby et. al., 2021**). Providing protected time was expected to yield positive results in terms of productivity and a more positive outlook on both participants' relationship with writing and their work life in general.

The communal approach was specifically designed to offer an opportunity to form connections across the university. We expected the writing retreats to enhance participants wellbeing (**Eardley et al., 2020**). We encouraged wellbeing practices in our two-day retreats, building in regular breaks, running them in locations with easy access to nature walks, and providing optional fitness facilities or yoga classes. The project has been welcomed by university staff not only for increasing their ability to create outputs but as an environment that helps support their wellbeing.

At first glance, T2W may seem relatively straightforward — simply providing time and space for writing within working hours. However, as facilitators, we discovered that this simplicity masks both the complexity of its impact and the skills and experience needed to deliver across the multiple outcomes we recognise through our theory of change. The project is not just about offering a quiet space to work and empowering people to block out space in their diaries to write. T2W addresses the deeper needs of participants who are often disadvantaged by traditional university systems. For many people, especially women with caring responsibilities, it is exceptionally hard to ring fence time to write; to put your own projects first and let pastoral care, domestic load and collaborating with colleagues go on to the back burner to focus on the papers and grants that are needed to progress your own career (**Babcock et al., 2022**).

The difficulty is compounded by the historical inequitable structures within academia. Although there have been great gains in gender equality in recent times, women academics still face a myriad of challenges moving through the pipeline (**Gill, 2009; Ivandic & Lassen, 2024; Westoby et al., 2021**). The workload expectations and the culture around productivity often do not account for the additional burdens that women and carers face, making it especially difficult for them to prioritise their own work (**Babcock et al., 2022**). The T2W programme is a step toward creating supportive structures so that all academics can thrive and is a way for institutions to acknowledge additional pressures that women, caregivers and underrepresented staff face.

Some senior staff and stakeholders, who may not share these life experiences, have struggled to fully appreciate the value of the project. While they may view the retreats as a useful 'nice to have' or luxury, they do not always recognize the essential role they play in supporting research excellence, especially for those who experience systemic barriers to career advancement. We are also aware that colleagues who have not attended the T2W retreats are likely unaware of our structured approach and the difference this can make to the outputs and outcomes of a retreat,

including immediate and ongoing productivity, relationship with writing, and overall wellbeing.

Participant response to the project has been overwhelmingly positive, with many members of our academic community relying on the project to complete tasks that would otherwise be set aside. However, we recognise that there is more we can do to support those with caring responsibilities. Colleagues who are single mothers, particularly those with no local support network, have found attending our residential retreats overnight is nearly impossible, due to the costs related to additional childcare.

Another unexpected outcome of the project has been the adoption and replication of protected time across different faculties within the university. T2W participants want their colleagues and students to benefit from this type of supported writing. Female participants setting up their own versions of protected time have also noticed that some of their male colleagues have a lack of understanding why these writing initiatives are useful, the uptake again being higher amongst female colleagues. This disparity highlights a broader issue within academia, where certain skills and forms of knowledge are undervalued, especially in terms of how institutional support structures can better foster these practices (**Montano, 2025**). The next section explores how these undervalued skills intersect with the need for stronger institutional support and the exchange of knowledge within academic environments

### **Recognising the Knowledge and Skills Behind the Design and Delivery**

Our feedback and evaluation processes have shown that much of the added value generated by the T2W programme stems from our approach to the design and delivery of the events, the spaces we hold them in, and the communication surrounding them. Our experience in facilitating and managing events have also contributed to the creation of welcoming, inclusive and purposeful time and space for writing. We also bring our experience as researcher developers to the table, building support for values and behaviours such as wellbeing, self-awareness and motivation into the design of the events.

Increasing capacity to support protected time to write across the university is a key part of the T2W project, but supporting colleagues to organise and facilitate their own retreats and other protected time revealed that many lack some or all of the skills outlined above. These skillsets tend to be overlooked in an academic setting, where professional skills are often perceived to be of lesser value (**Freeman & Price, 2024; Macfarlane, 2011; Whitchurch, 2008**). Additionally, as evidenced by the evolution of the REF, the primary focus tends to be on the work at hand,

rather than the people doing it (**Gadd, 2024; Inglis et al., 2024**). Those who have gone on to organise local programmes have predominantly been core members of the T2W community and repeat attenders at retreats, which may have helped build skills and confidence alongside clear understanding of the benefits.

Feedback from events and ongoing evaluation demonstrate that participants place high value on feeling invited, understanding the purpose and parameters of the event, the sense of community generated at the event and beyond, and the embedded support for developing healthier writing habits. Participants also report feeling looked after and valued, by both the facilitators and the university, as well as being pleasantly surprised by the intangible benefits of taking part.

### **Widening Institutional Support and Understanding Remains a Challenge**

Developing and delivering the T2W programme over the last three years connected us with a wide range of colleagues engaged in similar enterprises across the university. Realising that we were at the centre of a potential network, we organised a Meta Retreat in May 2024. This event created a retreat space for the core T2W community to connect with other colleagues who are independently providing protected time and other support for academic writing at all levels of experience. We focused on sharing our practice as facilitators, discussing and documenting the benefits of organised protected time, and thinking through how we could support each other in both our current activity and in establishing protected time for writing as an integral part of a healthy and inclusive academic culture.

We used Art of Hosting principles (**Art of Hosting, 2025; Corrigan, 2019**) and creative evaluation methods (**Christou et al., 2023**) to design a space for questioning, conversation, and creative, critical reflection on personal relationships with writing and the importance of organised time and space to practice it. Inviting senior leaders into the space alongside practitioners and facilitators resulted in a powerful, collaborative conversation and connections made on that day have evolved into a community of practice (CoP). We have collectively agreed on three initial foci: building a shared resource bank, supporting lead organisers to evaluate the impact of their work, and raising awareness of the strategic impact of protected time to write, particularly retreats.

Despite this groundswell of activity and enthusiasm, we are finding it difficult to confirm internal financial support for T2W beyond the end of our funded project. Our approach to evaluation has evolved with the complexity of the project, moving from simple feedback and impact

surveys to the development of a 'theory of change' (Weiss, 1995). In this final year of original funding, we are focusing our own evaluation activity on building the business case, gathering evidence to support the feedback that they have written more and better research outputs. Together with the feminist evaluation already completed, we hope to draw firmer connections between T2W's achievements and institutional strategic goals.

## **Conclusion**

We have found that organising a programme of structured, protected time for writing is a simple, cost-effective way of supporting University of Southampton staff. Staff who come to the writing retreats are writing more papers and grant applications (as well as other types of writing) and of better quality than they would without this support. However, the benefits of the project are not limited to increased productivity. We have discussed in this article the important impacts related to equity, inclusion and staff wellbeing.

The T2W project has had the greatest impact on supporting women in the academy. This has made us, as researcher developers, reflect on the labour, hidden barriers and undervalued skills of being a woman in our sector (Babcock et al., 2022; Mackenzie et al., 2022). The design of the project has also been influenced by other women academics and research developers (Murray, 2015; Zihm & Reid-Mackie, 2021). The project has left us wondering if the intrinsic understanding from our own experiences in academia are part of the reason we built a programme that is so powerful for fellow female academics.

The project's design has welcomed feedback from participants, and we have developed a 'theory of change' (Weiss, 1995) to guide this iterative process and provide a framework for widening impacts of the project. The design is flexible to different needs and has always aimed to acknowledge that writing can be a difficult endeavour and impart the knowledge that writers can be supported by a community of peers. We also recognise the limits of T2W to be truly equitable without finding a way to support carers without support networks, such as single mothers and international researchers, to attend our residential retreats. With this aim in mind, we are reaching out to the University of Southampton Parent and Carers Network and trying to navigate university financial systems that have previously been a barrier to us providing this support.

T2W has demonstrated the power of modelling inclusive, equitable research culture. By using broad eligibility criteria and inviting participants to use the time for any kind of academic writing, not just research grants and papers, we recognised the complex reality of most mid-career



academics, as they balance teaching, research and leadership (**Gould, 2022; Pickard-Smith et al., 2023**). We also made a space for the wider research community – moving beyond the traditional research pipeline from postgraduate researchers to professors, and purposefully including technicians, librarians, research professionals, and other ‘hidden roles’ (**Hidden REF, 2025**).

Moving forward we hope to experiment with different types of protected time. We recognise that some of our attendees are using the time to create non-traditional outputs, and we would like to further support these endeavours. We will be developing an ‘un-plugged’ retreat and are looking at other types of collaborative protected time for inspiration, such as Rachael Clerke’s *Work Party for Cheats* (**2024**), to understand how we can further support our staff to get all types of research-related work done

In many ways Time to Write has been an exercise in taking care and listening to colleagues. As we have evolved and evaluated the project, it has become clear that with the right skills and support, purposefully structured and protected time to write is relatively simple to organise and has huge impact on participants. We have made steps to achieve widened support for T2W from University leaders, and we hope that the community of practice we have initiated helps to build skills and capacity to provide that support, as well as increasing advocacy for ongoing protected time across the university.

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Rosie Wadman is a researcher developer with over ten years' experience in learning and development across the higher education and voluntary sectors. Currently a senior teaching fellow in the Centre for Higher Education Practice at the University of Southampton, she has a strong interest in participatory methods and the importance of inclusive community to developing positive working cultures.



Dr Jess Macpherson is a teaching fellow in the Centre of Higher Education Practice with a specialism in designing and teaching Creative Evaluation methods for Research Culture initiatives. Jess has a practice-based PhD in Feminist Choreographic practices from Bath Spa University.



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