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## ENG 300: On the Writing Process

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## **On the Writing Process**

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ENG 300

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## Introduction

Writing is a process undertaken daily by people all over the world. Some people write for work, others for enjoyment, others to observe and bring knowledge to curious minds. Whatever the reason, writing is a cardinal task for almost everyone, and if you do it often, it is important to do it efficiently. Many people see writing as a chore, churning out a mediocre assortment of filler words to hit a page limit or answer another vague prompt. Others struggle with distractions, procrastination, or finding the perfect place to hunker down and string together a few good paragraphs. However, it is essential to note that writing is the action, not the final product. As I initially stated, writing is a *process*, and the process itself can be much more fulfilling and worthwhile than a word count or a final paper if you allow it to be. Someone can only say this with confidence after a thoughtful examination of their writing process: what works and what does not? So, what does my writing process look like?

### Typical Writing Environment and Challenges

I typically write within the confines of my room, (I live at home, as I am only 18) which is always clean, spare the occasional cat or two taking up residency on my bed, desk, or lap. I can only work when things are in order, so I rarely write when anything is in disarray. I always work late at night because it is the only time I am granted any reprieve from constant noise. Whether it's the revving of engines or blaring music, it seeps through the hastily constructed walls of my "copy and pasted" tract duplex. While my neighborhood never rests, I will likely avoid overstimulation when working at night. I usually write at my desk with soft lighting and music in the background to ensure that no other harsh stimuli take my attention.

As much as I emphasize the beauty of the process, my actual writing process is anything but. I struggle with one issue when I write: I just cannot pay attention. The two causes of my

distraction are scrolling on my phone and the music I listen to. I rarely exercise the discipline to put my phone away when writing. I hand myself over to the “ping” of notifications only to later realize in abject horror the amount of time I have wasted browsing mindlessly. I devote myself to writing again, only to remember a text I forgot to send, and I am ensnared in my phone again. I face a similar frustration regarding the music I listen to. I have learned I cannot watch TV because it takes too much of my attention away, but as a musician I struggle to even listen to music sometimes. On one hand, music is like a second language to me- one I can take in without a second thought. On the other hand, I enjoy it so much I can get wrapped up in the song that is playing, or lining up the perfect queue of songs, or finding a new artist to play on shuffle. To explore solutions to these issues, I investigated them in a similar way: I tested the effects of phone usage by spending 30 minutes writing with access to my phone, and 30 minutes where my phone was silenced and put out of sight. Then, I tested the effects of music in foreign vs. fluent languages by spending 30 minutes listening to English bossa nova, and 30 minutes listening to Portuguese bossa nova.

### **Effects of Phone Usage**

The first issue I wanted to investigate was how using my phone potentially interrupted my writing process. Studies show that switching between two tasks, like working and checking your phone, can negatively impact your ability to retain information, and thus, your performance (Chen & Yan, 2016). People use their phones for a variety of things when they work. Some people only use their phones to play music, but others multitask by texting, checking emails, and browsing social media. In a 2014 study on attention to studying while multitasking, researchers found that doing multiple activities like texting, listening to music, and checking social media, participants’ attention to studying was only around 60%. When only listening to music, however,

attention increased to 79% (David et al., 2014, p. 11). This suggests that trying to focus on multiple tasks at once leads to a decreased attention span. Another researcher confirms this, stating “individuals can only hold a certain amount of information within working memory before experiencing cognitive overload. Therefore, it is not surprising that recent studies on media multitasking (Bowman, Levine, Waite, & Gendron, 2010; Jeong & Fishbein, 2007; Levine, Waite, & Bowman, 2007; Lin & Lee, 2009; Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2010) indicate that we do not have the cognitive ability to multitask more than one medium at a time, which writing with media distractions require” (Portanova, 2017, p. 248). This suggest that trying to do multiple things at once like listening to music, scrolling on my phone, and writing efficiently may not prove successful.

## **Results**

After performing my test, I measured my results in two dimensions: productivity (word count) and perceived productivity (Likert scale from 1-5). The results were somewhat surprising. When I checked my phone freely, my word count was 348 words written and 2/5 on the productivity scale. There was a period where I started scrolling on my phone, only to realize almost ten minutes had passed. I wrote a lot, but I felt I did not accomplish very much. However, when my phone was put away, my word count was only 282 but I marked a 4/5 on the productivity scale. I wrote even less than I did for the first test but felt much more productive. There could be many implications to this, and I cannot be certain without performing multiple retests. Perhaps, because I write late at night, I was more tired by the time I performed the session without my phone. Maybe short bursts of distraction from my phone gave me the renewed focus to write with higher energy. Either way, the effects of using my phone while I write were not conclusive.

### Effects of Music in Fluent vs. Foreign Languages

The second study, the effect of listening to music in a fluent or foreign language while writing, proved more interesting. Some studies show that being able to have something familiar in the background, like music you already know or understand, can lead to selective attention, or “the cognitive ability to reject familiar stimuli unrelated to a task” whereas unfamiliar music can take up too much attention and be distracting (Portanova, 2017, p. 255). Some argue that music without lyrics is best, but a 2015 study found that classical music was more distracting than common pop songs, and the researchers theorize it may be because of the familiarity of the song and its lyrics providing the ability to tune it out (Young & Nolan, 2015).

I have recently taken a liking to bossa nova jazz music, which originated in Brazil. Because the genre is enjoyed worldwide, the songs are written in various languages like English, Portuguese, Japanese, and Korean. As someone who speaks English and is learning Portuguese, the question here is a double-edged sword: does singing along to music I can understand distract me more, or trying to listen to something I cannot understand? Is it easier to tune out something I know well and am familiar with, or filter something I do not as background noise? A recent study performed in 2021 explored the effects of writing while listening to music in a foreign vs. a fluent language, Korean and English in this case. The results showed that music did not affect productivity based on word count, but it did significantly impact the *perceived* productivity of the writer: “when participants were asked about the songs, exactly two thirds of the listeners found the English song to be more distracting than the Korean alternative” (Hu, 2021, p. 16). However, participants wrote a similar amount of words for each language session. While there was no statistical impact of language on writing through word count, Hu suggests “different

aspects of music may potentially have greater psychological impacts on the overall quality and productivity of writing tasks” (Hu, 2021, p. 17).

## **Results**

Similar to the phone usage study, I used word count and a Likert scale to discern productivity along with perceived productivity. The first session, listening to music in English, was widely successful. Even though I knew a lot of the songs, I could hum along without devoting any forethought to it. I had a word count of 423 and marked 5/5 on the productivity scale. I felt that this session was extremely productive, and my word count reflected this. My second session, listening to music in Portuguese, went differently. While my word count was 397, I felt much more distracted and scored a 3/5 on the productivity scale. Because I am actively trying to learn the language, I kept stopping to read the lyrics and trying to translate, or paying attention to dialects and pronunciation, etc. This upholds some of the findings in Hu’s study: while my statistical results (through word count) did not vary much, there was a secondary psychological effect of listening to music in a foreign language that could not be measured except through a subjective scale. As Hu and Portanova suggested, I believe that it was easier for me to filter out music that was in a language I was already familiar with.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, understanding the root causes of hang-ups in your writing process can be fundamental for refining it and making it enjoyable. While specific studies may not have shown a definitive answer, like my investigation into the effects of phone usage, they can highlight an issue for someone to be more conscious of in the future. I know that in the future, I will not pick up my phone without remembering how much it negatively impacted my focus. With the other study of music proving to be much more conclusive, I can say that while music in general does

help me focus, it is much easier for me to focus on my writing when the music is in a language I am already fluent in. I am interested to see that if, as I learn to speak more Portuguese, I can tune out the songs easier. Regardless, trying to find small ways to change my writing process has also changed the way I view writing as a whole, and will certainly have a lasting impact on the way I write.



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