



CENTER FOR  
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# Summer Writing Group Special Topics Series

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## Developing a Habit of Writing: Theory and Practice

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Center for Faculty Excellence*

# Developing a Habit of Writing: Theory and Practice

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**Why Develop a Habit of Writing?**

**What Can Psychology Tell Us About Developing a Habit of Writing?**

**Initiating Your Individual Plan for Developing a Habit of Writing**

**Question and Answer/Survey**

# SWG Special Topics Session:

## Developing a Habit of Writing: Theory and Practice

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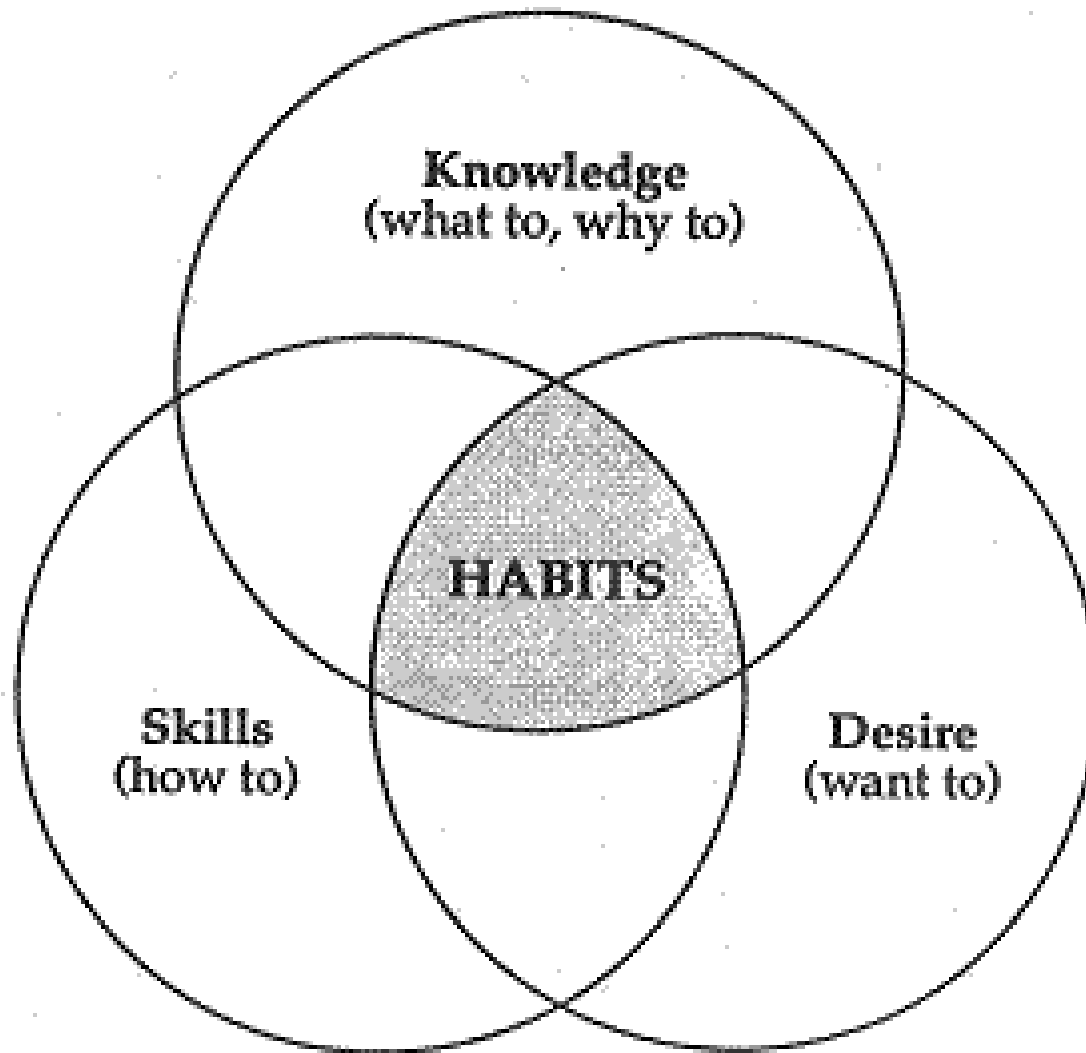
### Learning Objectives:

1. To articulate benefits of approaching academic writing as a habit
2. To describe the roles of contingency management and the writing environment in developing a habit of writing
3. To initiate an individualized plan for developing a habit of writing

# HABIT

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a behavioral routine that is  
repeated regularly and  
tends to occur subconsciously



## EFFECTIVE HABITS

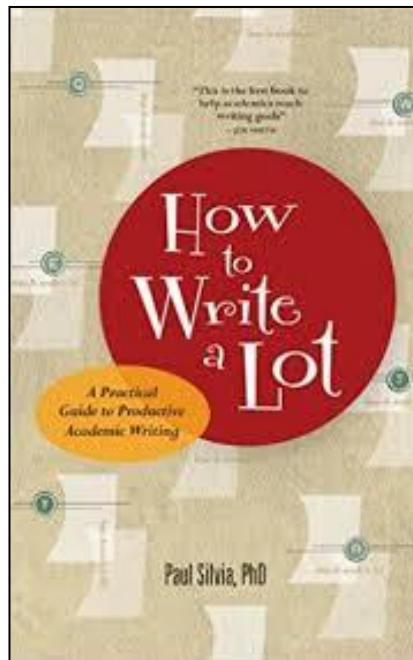
*Internalized principles and patterns of behavior*

# Nature of Writing

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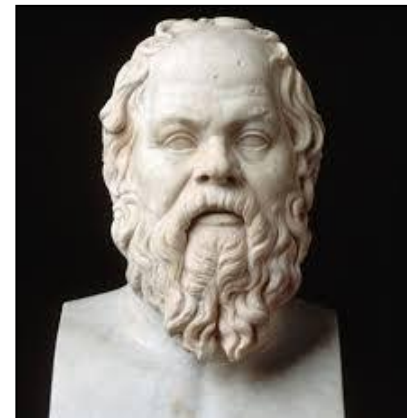
## Habit-Based Writing

- Writing as a skill



## Nonhabitual Writing

- Writing as a gift, talent
- Writing as inspiration-based
- E.g., Generative writing



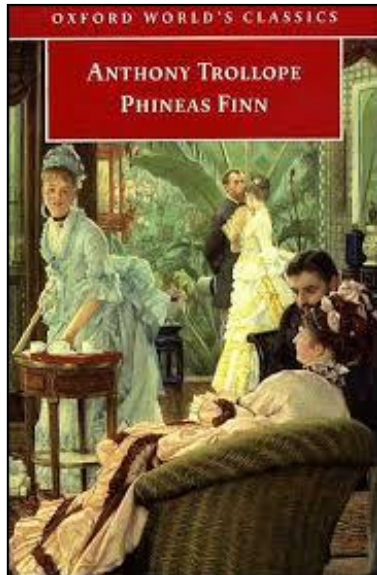
Socrates

# Pattern of Writing

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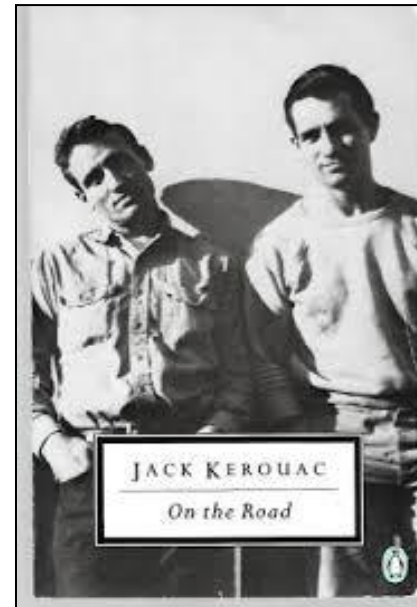
## Habit-Based Writing

- Frequent (e.g., daily)
- Regular and predictable occurrences



## Nonhabitual Writing

- Intermittent
- Occasional
- Binge

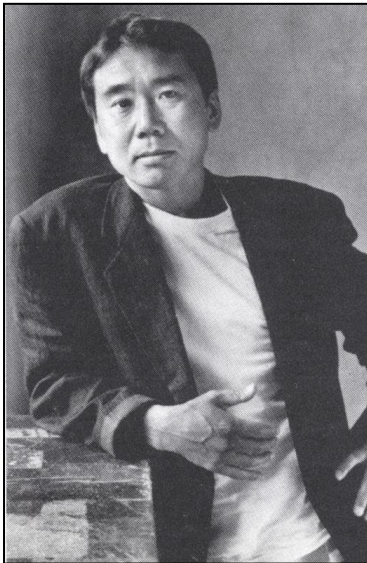


# Stimulus for Writing

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## Habit-Based Writing

- The Schedule



Haruki Murakami

## Nonhabitual Writing

- Deadline





# Benefits of Habits-Based Approach: Authors' Anecdotal Reports

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- Stephen King
  - >63 novels over nearly 5 decades
  - “I try to get six pages a day.”
- John Steinbeck
  - Nobel Prize-winning novelist
  - “Lose track of the 400 pages and write just one page for each day.”

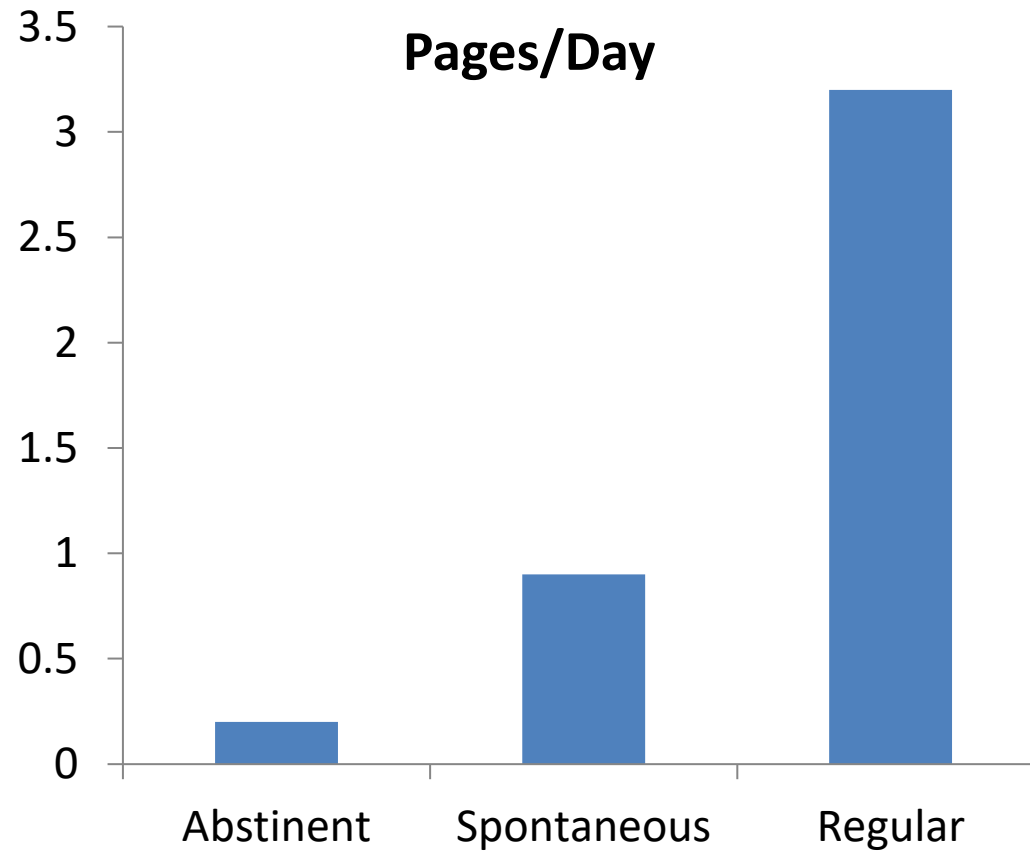
# Benefits of Habits-Based Approach: Controlled Study

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- Participants: 27 college professors who struggle with writing
- Conditions (all asked to list new ideas each day)
  - **Abstinent:** only emergency writing over 10 weeks of the study
  - **Spontaneous:** 50 scheduled sessions but write only when feel like it
  - **Regular:** 50 scheduled sessions and required to write at each
- Measures
  - Productivity (# pages/day)
  - Creativity (days between creative ideas)

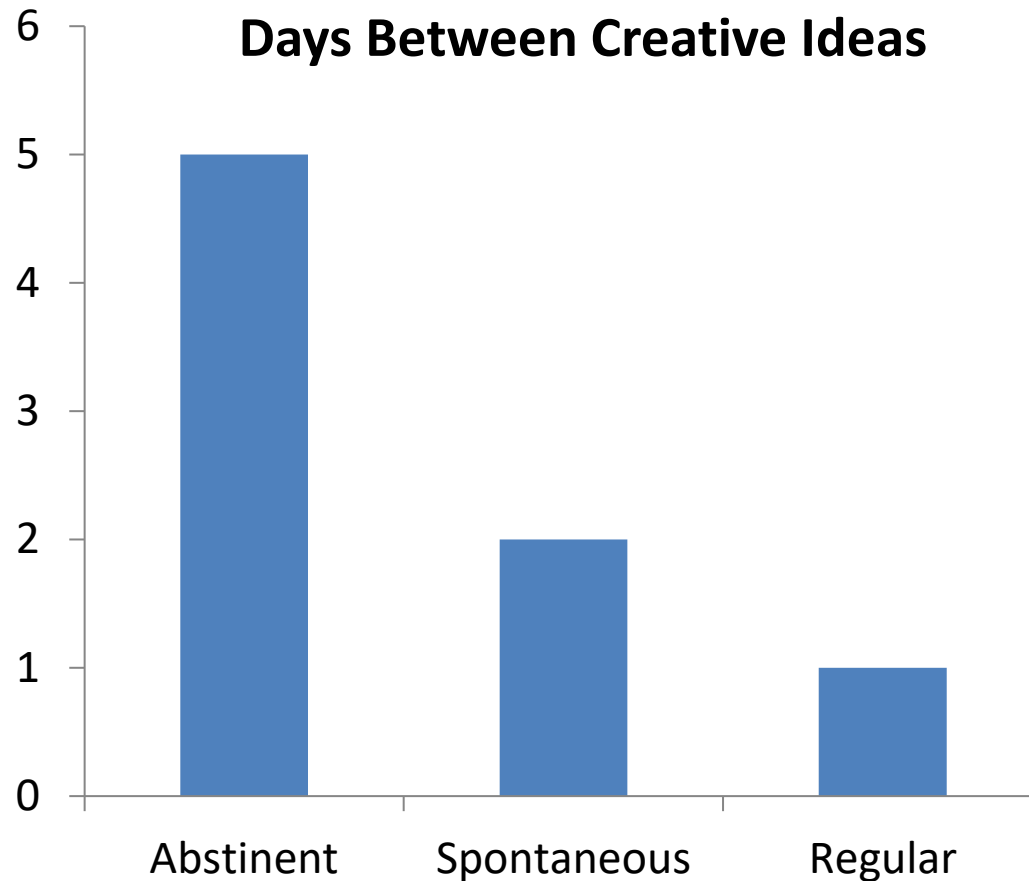
# Regular Writing: Highest Output

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# Regular Writing: Highest Creativity

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	Habit-Based Writing	Nonhabitual Writing
Nature of writing	Writing as skill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing as gift, talent</li> <li>• Writing as inspiration-based</li> </ul>
Pattern of writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequent (e.g., daily)</li> <li>• Regular and predictable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spontaneous</li> <li>• Binge</li> </ul>
Stimulus for writing	The Schedule	Deadlines

## Why Develop a Habit of Writing?

- To gain control of the writing process
- To stabilize writing output (become more consistently productive)



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# **Developing a Habit of Writing: What Can Psychology Tell Us?**

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# HABIT

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a routine, behavior, or cognitive process that begins spontaneously but is repeated automatically as a result of prior experience

# Functions of Habit

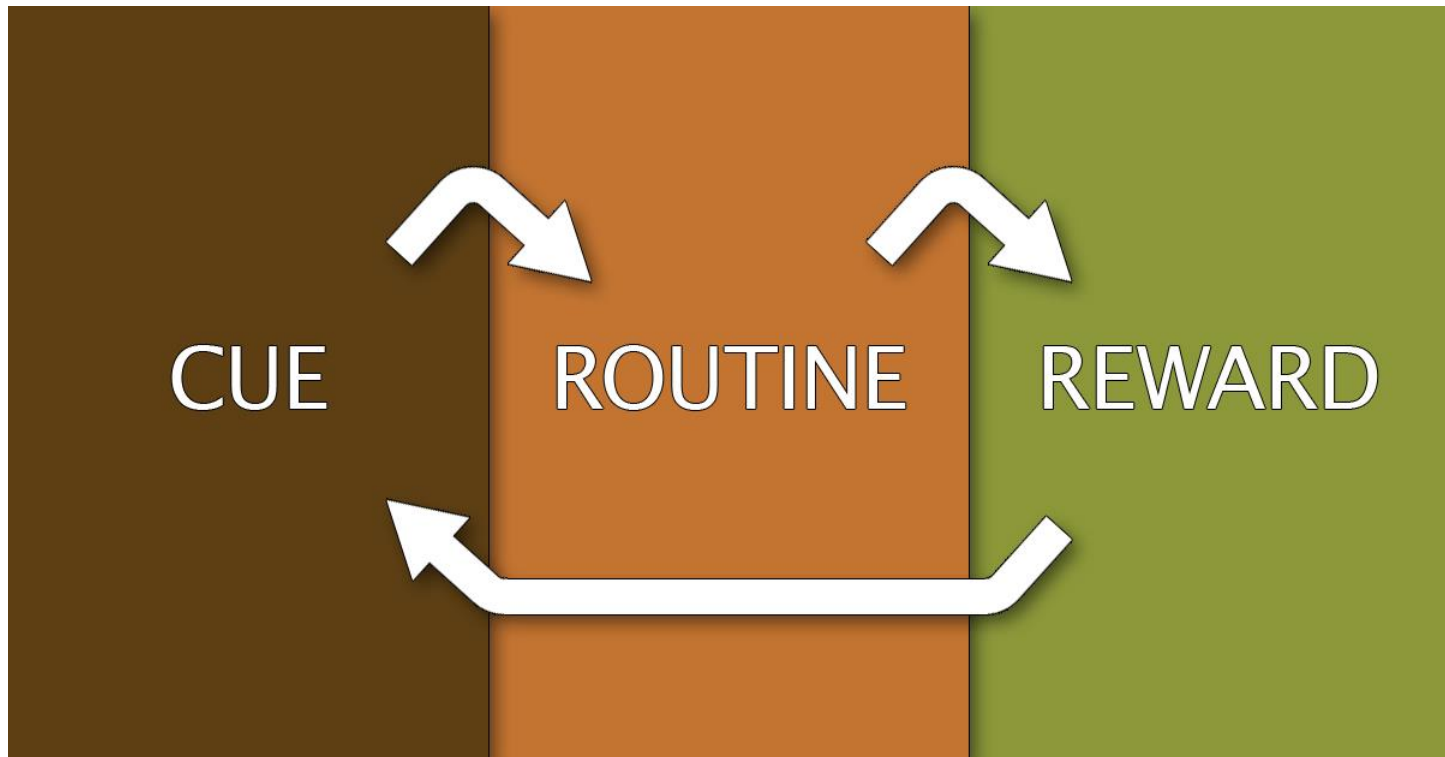
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- Enhance the efficiency of our behavior
- Reduce the cognitive burden of decision-making and thereby free mental energy for other activities



# Psychology of Habit: The Habit Loop

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# Characteristics of Habit

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- Are context dependent
  - Strengthen with repetition
  - Strengthen with association with cues from the environment
- Once habits form, the perception of the cue is sufficient to trigger the response (routine)
- Once habits form, they are relatively inflexible---as distinguished from **goal-directed behaviors**, which are flexible (performed based on predicted/expected outcomes)





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# Developing Your Habit of Writing

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# Productive Writing: The Challenge

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## THE LAW OF DELAY:

*That which can be delayed, will be.*

Writing is an activity that can almost always be delayed.

# Productive Writing: The Solution

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## THE PRIORITY PRINCIPLE:

*That which can be delayed, need not be.*

How? Use **contingency management!**

Make a recurrent, daily activity that you enjoy contingent on completing your “delayable” task (i.e., writing) first.

Boice R. *Professors as Writers: A Self-Help Guide to Productive Writing*. New Forums Press, Inc. 1990.

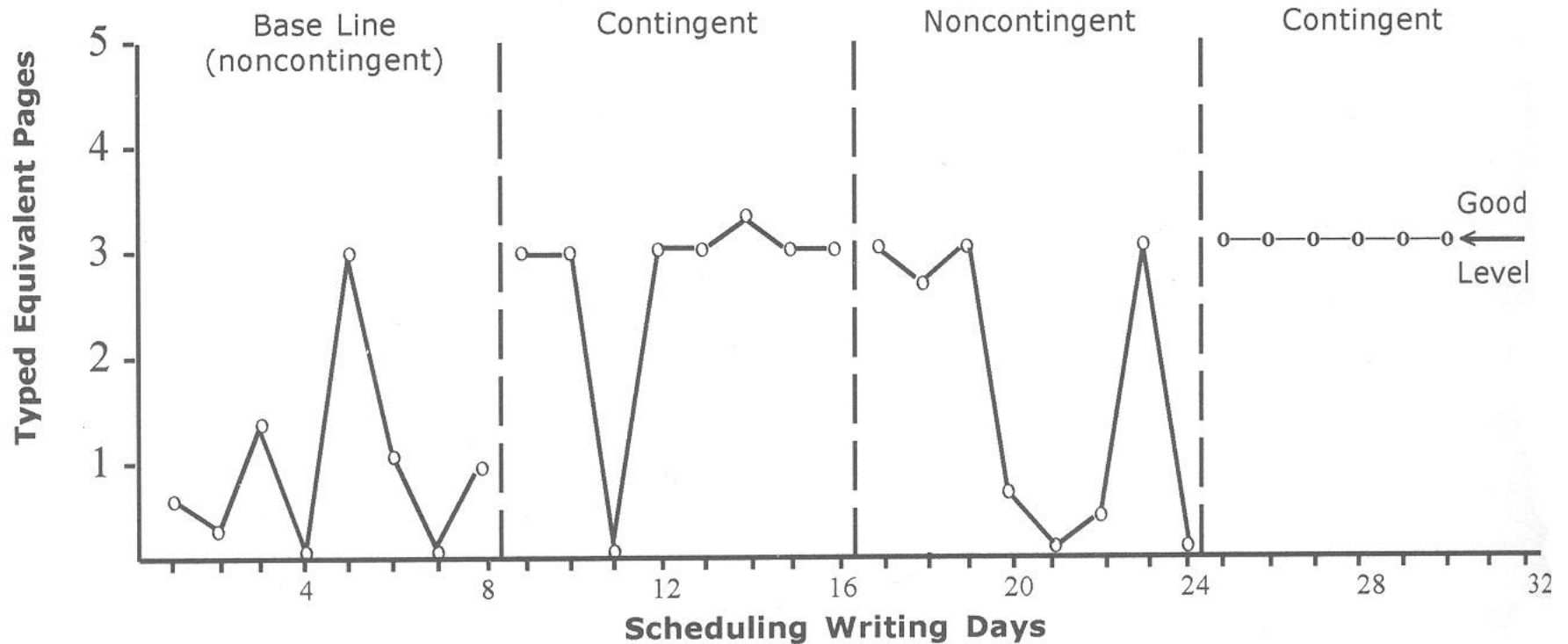
# Contingency Management

Trained in spontaneous/  
generative writing or  
“when in the mood”

Priority principle  
(Access to shower)

Suspension of  
contingency

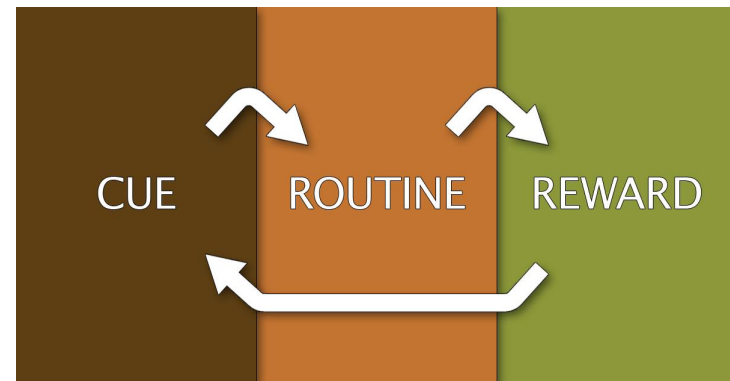
Return of contingency  
 (“seeing the light”)



# Developing a Habit: The Habit Loop

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- **Routine:** writing (the desired behavior)
- **Cue:** trigger for writing
  - A time
  - A place
- **Reward**
  - Boice's *contingency*



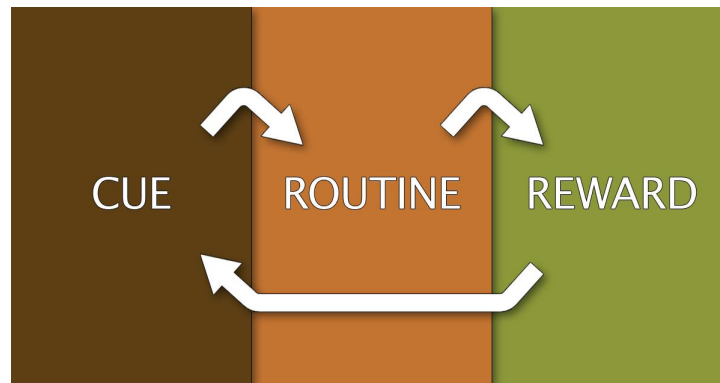
[klassenperformancegroup.com/components-of-a-habit/](http://klassenperformancegroup.com/components-of-a-habit/)



# Developing a Habit: The Habit Loop

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What good habit (outside of writing) have you developed?



# Activity: The Priority Principle in Action

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## THINK/PAIR/SHARE

4/6/5 Minutes

- **THINK:** Determine a desired duration of your weekday writing sessions and identify times for writing each day May 17-21.
- Identify a CUE for your daily writing.
- Establish a CONTINGENCY for your daily writing.
  - *Contingency:* recurrent, daily activity or behavior that you can enjoy contingent upon your completing your writing.
- Record your writing time, cue, and contingency on Page 1 of your Activity Sheet packet.
- **PAIR:** In your group, discuss your choices of times, cues, and contingencies.
- **SHARE:** Return from breakout for sharing out.

# Share

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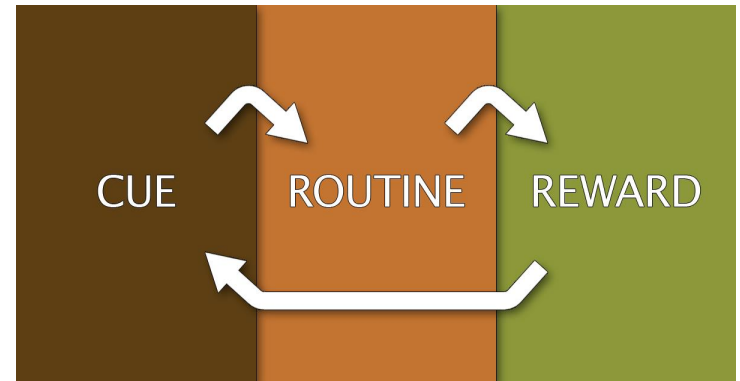
## Cues? Contingencies?

## Questions?

# Developing a Habit: The Importance of the Writing Environment

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- Environment can serve as a cue
- Environment can provide stimulus control (increases probability that writing will occur regularly and successfully)
- Optimize your writing environment by considering Boice's 7 guidelines



[klassenperformancegroup.com/components-of-a-habit/](http://klassenperformancegroup.com/components-of-a-habit/)

Boice R, *Professors as Writers: A Self-Help Guide to Productive Writing*, 1990, New Forums Press p 84.

Donita Robinson, PhD. UNC Bowles Center for Alcohol Studies.

# Rearranging the Writing Environment: Boice's 7 guidelines

1. **Establish one or a few regular places** in which you will do all serious writing, If possible, make these locations (e.g., a desk in your study) places where you do nothing but serious writing; other writing (e.g., correspondence) would be carried out elsewhere.
2. Regular writing sites must also be sacred in the sense that no other temptations such as magazine, newspapers, novels can be on site. Thus, **non-essential reading would be done elsewhere.**
3. Similarly, the temptation of cleaning up one's writing site should not be allowed to distract. Instead, **clean the writing area only at the completion of each session.**
4. Arrange writing sites to **minimize noisome distractions.** Find a reasonably quiet place. Work with background music if it helps.
5. **Limit social interruptions** during writing times by: a) closing the door to your office, den, or whatever; b) posting a writing schedule on your closed door that requests visitors to limit interruptions to brief (e.g., 10 seconds) essential messages. c) unplugging the phone; and d) enlisting significant others and colleagues as enforcers by asking them to help head off potential disruptions (including, of course, themselves).
6. **Enlist another writer to share part of your writing schedule** by joining you for mutually quiet periods of work.
7. **Make your writing site comfortable.** I, for example, work best in a recliner chair because it reduces fatigue, especially neck and arm strain. Experiment to see what works best for you.

# On Your Own:

## Optimize Your Writing Environment

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- Consider Boice's 7 guidelines for optimizing your writing environment.
- Choose one guideline that seems most important to your writing efforts.
- Consider:
  - What changes will you have to make to implement that guideline?
  - What challenges do you anticipate in implementing the guideline?  
How will you overcome them?
  - Update your worksheet
- Return your sheets to me in the upcoming days and I'll share out all ideas to today's attendees.

# Developing a Habit: After You've Settled Into a Routine

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- Adjust contingencies as necessary.
- Identify metrics for tracking your progress.
  - Time spent writing
  - Output
- Set requirements beyond time writing.
  - Minimum levels of output
  - Specific session goals

# Resources

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SWG2021 Participants MS Teams site (Special Topics: Habit of Writing Folder)

Boice R. Professors as Writers: A Self-Help Guide to Productive Writing. New Forums Press, Inc. 1990.

Today's slides and activity sheets





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# Questions?

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# Session Survey

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- This Session's brief online survey will arrive in your email inbox this afternoon.
- Your feedback is critical to inform our programming.
- Thank you for attending!