VI. Set SMART Goals

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Major writing projects—a dissertation or a book, for example—may be daunting when considered as a whole. You cannot sit down and simply say, "Today I'm going to write my dissertation." To make the writing project more manageable, you need a strategy that will help you get started, maintain momentum, and, ultimately, finish your task.

One such strategy is to set SMART goals. The acronym stands for goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound. The idea emerges from business management, attributed to George Doran in his 1981 article in Management Review. The concept was revived by Paul Meyer in Attitude Is Everything, published in 2003. In the corporate world, SMART goals enable employees to engage in short- and long-term strategic planning. The goals allow managers to hold employees accountable by providing performance benchmarks. As a writer, you can adopt SMART goals to break down your larger writing goals into smaller writing assignments and to measure your progress.

Specific

To begin, you need specific goals. "Write my dissertation" may be your ultimate goal and will be the result of your SMART goals. Specific goals, however, need to be narrow and concrete. Generate a specific goal in the same way that you determined a topic for your dissertation. For example, if you wanted to study the effects of media on children, you most likely realized the topic was too broad. By asking yourself which effects, which media, and which children, you might have narrowed your topic to this: A study of the impact of the televised advertising of sugary drinks on the beverage preferences of preschool children.

Apply this process to find a specific goal within the too-large goal of "write my dissertation." Dissertations are broken into concrete sections, which helps to identify a specific goal. Break this very large task into discrete subtasks: "Write the section of the dissertation's introduction that links childhood obesity to the consumption of sugary drinks." Now you have a starting point to begin writing.

Not specific goal: Write the introduction.

Specific goal: Write the section of the introduction that links childhood obesity to the consumption of sugary drinks.

Measurable

Next, convert your specific goal into a measurable goal. Decide how you will know when you have met your goal. A common method for measuring output in writing is by the number of pages generated. In the example above, decide how many pages of material in the introduction should be devoted to research on obesity and sugary drinks and make that your measurable goal.

Not yet measurable goal: Write a section that links childhood obesity to the consumption of sugary drinks.

Measurable goal: Write a 10-page section that links childhood obesity to the consumption of sugary drinks.

Now you can measure your progress.

Attainable

An attainable goal forces you to be realistic by asking, "How am I going to achieve this goal?" Setting attainable goals ensures that you have laid the groundwork for your writing task. If you have not gathered the journal articles on childhood obesity, then writing ten pages on the topic is not an attainable goal.

Not attainable goal: Using my classroom observations write a 10-page section that links childhood obesity to the consumption of sugary drinks.

Attainable goal: Gather studies on childhood obesity to prepare to write a 10-page section that links childhood obesity to the consumption of sugary drinks.

Relevant

The fourth element of SMART goals, relevance, keeps you focused and prevents you from getting sidetracked. Ask yourself if what you are writing or researching will further your goal. If not, put it aside and return to your specific goal. Your specific, measurable goal is to write ten pages on a particular

topic. The prevalence of diabetes in obese children may be interesting, for example, but it is not relevant to your goal of linking childhood obesity to the consumption of sugary drinks. As you read the studies you have gathered, remain focused on this link.

Not relevant goal: Gather studies on childhood obesity and create an annotated bibliography of findings to prepare to write a 10-page section that links childhood obesity to the consumption of sugary drinks by **Relevant goal:** Gather studies on childhood obesity and create a table of the links between obesity and sugar consumption to prepare to write a 10-page section that links childhood obesity to the consumption of sugary drinks

Time Bound

Finally, SMART goals are time bound. In other words, you need to set deadlines for completing each specific goal. This requires long-term planning. In this example, set the deadline to finish the introduction of the dissertation and work backwards. Determine the purpose(s) of the chapter and break it into subsections. Set a date by which you will complete each subsection. Now you have a time-bound goal.

Not a time-bound goal: Write the section of the introduction that links childhood obesity to the consumption of sugary drinks.
Time-bound goal: Schedule two hours a day for 10 days to gather studies on childhood obesity, create a table of the links between obesity and sugar consumption, and write a 10-page section that links childhood obesity to the consumption of sugary drinks.

Once you have completed this SMART goal, you can move onto the next SMART goal with a sense of accomplishment. You maintain momentum because each goal is measurable and time-bound. You finish your dissertation or writing project because each goal is specific, achievable, and relevant. SMART goals can turn a daunting writing project into a completed one.

In the next blog you will learn more strategies for developing a writing plan.

References

Doran, G. T. (1981). There's a S.M.A.R.T. way to write management's goals and objectives. Management Review, 70, 35-36.
Meyer, Paul J. (2003). Attitude Is Everything: If You Want to Succeed Above and Beyond. Waco, TX:

Meyer Resource Group.

Questions for Reflection

1. How have you used goal setting as you've worked on your writing projects?
2. How can you apply the SMART goal concepts to your own planning?