

My Story with Academic Writing: A Junior Social Scientist's Reflection

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Summer 2023: Arrival

The summer of 2023 was unusually rainy, and the air along the U.S. East Coast carried a constant dampness. Toward the end of the season, just as the air began to dry, I took advantage of that brief sense of “crispness” to pack up all my belongings and hand them over to a moving company. With only a carry-on suitcase, I flew from Rhode Island to Ohio and began my tenure-track academic life.

Fall 2023 – Spring 2024: A Beginner

Perhaps because I had already exhausted my anxiety during the previous winter—preparing job talks on countless flights—I felt unexpectedly relaxed after relocating across states and starting my new position. My memory of the first semester is not particularly vivid; it simply did not feel as difficult as others had warned. Like the line Peggy Lee sings—“*Is that all there is to a fire?*”—we all fear the fire, but once it actually starts, it somehow feels manageable.

That fall, I taught just one new course, did some writing on the side, and handled basic departmental service. Outside of work, I made new friends, watched the NBA (Cleveland has the Cavaliers, along with top-tier football and baseball teams), explored the Great Lakes and surrounding nature, and even returned to China during winter break. As someone who enjoys all four seasons, I found Ohio quite pleasant.

The real sense that my writing was falling behind came one afternoon in spring 2024. After teaching two back-to-back new classes, I finally felt overwhelmed under the pressure of tenure. The feeling came suddenly, like a sharp drop. I began to regret certain decisions: for instance, spending the summer before starting my job enjoying the rain instead of preparing manuscripts in advance—especially given the long publication cycles in sociology, which meant I submitted nothing in my first year. I also regretted becoming independent too early, no longer collaborating with my advisor, which led to a sharp drop in productivity.

Many nights, I stared at a blank Word document, overwhelmed by negative emotions. Anxiety and darkness became my lullaby.

So in April, at a conference, I sought advice from senior scholars. Their response brought some comfort: for many junior faculty, real writing does not begin until the summer after the first year. Indeed, those four months that outsiders see as carefree are actually the golden period for catching up. I thought to myself—this was certainly not written on the “ticket” before boarding the tenure-track ship. But now that I was on board, I had to follow the rules and try not to fall overboard.

Summer 2024 – Spring 2025: A Turning Point

During my first summer, I did have more concentrated writing time. I even bought a large whiteboard and mapped out my projects in detail—Paper 1, Paper 2, Paper 3—but my submission count still did not increase. Naturally, no submissions meant no publications—a near-perfect linear relationship.

Objectively, there were uncontrollable factors. For instance, the back pain I had developed while writing my dissertation during the pandemic worsened significantly. Despite physical therapy and acupuncture, it reached a point where sitting itself became painful. Each time I approached my desk, my body anticipated the pain, reducing my productivity. I also spent considerable time caring for someone close to me. While my understanding of depression and caregiving deepened, my understanding of writing barely progressed.

But the biggest limitation—what I later realized after meeting a professional coach—was this: I had put all my eggs in one basket, and that basket itself was flawed.

For empirical sociologists, good data are like hens, and papers or books are eggs. If the hen is not productive, the eggs will not sell well. Reviewers (the inspectors) will not approve them, and editors (the supermarkets) will not put them on the shelf. At the time, I had three research streams—three hens—but I focused almost entirely on the weakest one.

That summer, I revised two papers. One was submitted to *Demography* and, after six months of delay, received a desk rejection. The other went to a gerontology journal; after a revise-and-resubmit, it was still rejected. When I vented to a senior colleague, she encouraged me: “There are many good journals—just submit to the next one.”

By November of my second year, Cleveland’s first snow had arrived, and Lake Erie—our “mother lake”—was beginning to freeze. I was still living off past work, with no new output. If the first year brought the despair of “not writing,” the post-summer period brought an even colder despair: “trying hard but seeing no results.” I continued teaching and researching quietly, but with growing unease.

Yet sometimes, turning points emerge at the lowest moments. Just when you feel you have gone 90 miles out of 100, pushing a little further can change everything. One evening, after a workout and a surge of dopamine, I made a decision: change papers, change journals, change strategies.

If the eggs from that hen would not sell, perhaps they needed better packaging (framing). While top journals do care about packaging, it takes time and effort. What I needed more urgently was to revive my pipeline.

After shifting to my other research streams and adjusting my approach, I submitted more promising papers that winter. The writing process itself had not changed much, but the new “eggs” sold better. In spring 2025, I finally had my first sole-authored publication on the tenure track (Song, 2025d), no longer relying on earlier work (Jackson, Song, and Kalil., 2024). Since I was no longer teaching new courses, I could focus more on quality and framing, and I submitted two more papers by late spring.

Summer 2025 Onward: Building Habits

At the time, I did not yet realize that the real transformation in my writing would come that summer—when I hired a writing coach. From him, I took nearly 20 pages of notes and began consciously building a healthy, sustainable writing habit. I realized that this coach—who specialized in “raising hens, marketing eggs, and understanding human psychology”—might benefit me for a lifetime.

The decision to hire a coach came somewhat randomly. During a casual conversation with a collaborator nearing tenure, I mentioned taking a semester-long sabbatical to systematically upgrade my writing approach. She immediately recommended Rich. With some hesitation, I secured a small amount of research funding and began biweekly one-hour coaching sessions, ten in total.

The first three sessions were structured lectures based on his experience working with over 600 scholars. The remaining sessions were highly personalized, covering everything from grant writing and job negotiations to anxiety, departmental politics, and minority experiences. Asking questions has never been my weakness, and we had many engaging conversations. I have two cats—Mango and Coconut—and he has even more pets; they occasionally appeared in our Zoom calls.

The process followed a cycle: theory, practice, reflection, and personalized adjustment. Gradually, I realized that my previous vague efforts needed to be systematized into stable habits.

Rich emphasized strategy. Three key lessons stood out:

First, dedicated writing sessions are precious. Writing four days a week (excluding a teaching day), with two to three sessions per day of 45–60 minutes, is already excellent. These sessions should be treated like classes—you don’t skip them. As he often said, “You wouldn’t skip teaching, right? Then you shouldn’t skip writing.” During a session, you do not stop—unless there is “blood” (a literal emergency).

Rituals help: a short routine before writing, such as coffee, looking out the window, or brief meditation. During writing, minimize distractions—ideally, only your Word document is open.

Second, writing is about voice, not transcription. Writing appears solitary but is fundamentally social. You must know your audience and hold the microphone yourself. In literature reviews, for example, many people simply summarize others’ voices. But if all you present are others’ ideas, where is your own voice? Others’ work should serve your argument.

Third, emotions are real, but thinking is controllable. Rejection is inevitable, but what matters is how we interpret it. Rich taught techniques like treating oneself with the same kindness one would offer a friend, or writing down emotional reactions to identify irrational patterns. Now, when I receive a rejection, I remind myself that tenure does not depend on any single paper.

With his guidance, and the protection of sabbatical time, I steadily completed writing sessions, and my publications began to accumulate (Song, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d; Song 2026; Song & Zhao, 2025, 2026).

The Road Ahead

In a few months, I will have completed three full years since starting my position. My views on academic writing have changed greatly. The most central point is this: writing does not happen naturally, nor does it emerge from sudden inspiration or come together in one stroke; rather, it is a habit that requires continuous training and long-term maintenance. Practicing this cannot be separated from sustained, professionalized learning.

Although my coaching with Rich has already ended, I still go back to his notes repeatedly, reading them again and again, thinking them through. Just the day before finalizing this piece, I had just returned from a writing workshop. There, I learned a very simple method: when doing final revisions and already feeling fatigued from writing, switch perspectives and become the reviewer, asking yourself, “If I were the reviewer of this paper, how would I provide feedback?”

If Rich knew that I spent two writing sessions on this article, he might show a knowing smile, because this does not seem like the “optimal investment.” But as he said, each person’s passion for writing and their experience of it are different, and we also need to sustain that passion through different types of writing (I also attend a monthly fiction reading group to reconnect with the beauty of language).

Indeed, writing runs through our daily lives: from notes on our phones, emails, and recommendation letters, to academic papers, administrative reports, and job application materials. Yet writing *about how to write* is relatively rare. I have always appreciated the professionalization within academia, and I have taken part in many such exchanges. A large part of my motivation comes from gratitude toward the academic community. Along the way, I have benefited from many career-development books, such as the job-market “bible” *The Professor Is In* and Professor Yue Qian’s recent book *Entering Academia*. Sharing experiences and reflections on professional development is itself a form of good service.

Finally, I want to say something about the balance between work and life. After going through both low points and breakthroughs, my overall feeling is this: more stable writing habits have actually allowed me to enjoy life more. My anxiety has lessened, and my body has gradually recovered. The back pain that I once thought would stay with me for life has now improved significantly (thanks also to weekly power yoga). I am also more able, when I feel tired, to give myself more comfort and understanding. A day is still 24 hours, but the difference lies in this: whether it is a focused 45-minute session, or four hours in front of the computer that result in only four lines of writing.

Since 2025, I have also had the most fulfilling period of leisure life since starting my job: in the summer, I traveled with friends to the forests of New Hampshire; in the winter, I vacationed with my parents by the sea in Southeast Asia; not long ago, I returned from a solo road trip through the mountains of West Virginia. Rich said that many successful writers actually complete a large amount of writing while traveling. Last year, when I flew from the U.S. to Beijing to give a talk at Renmin University of China, I tried this during a two-day trip and indeed managed to get quite a bit of writing done. This summer, when I travel to Canada and Spain for conferences, I also plan to continue arranging things this way. In fact, I have now formed the habit of arriving at the airport one hour early and intentionally scheduling a 45-minute writing session in my calendar. At this very

moment, having finished this piece, my session has just ended. Closing my laptop, I feel very happy, and I begin walking toward the exit of Chicago O'Hare airport.

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