

When time is wide open and deadlines do not press

by Jack Aslanian

The following observations and speculative explanations for them do not specifically answer the banner question of this issue of *TWS*, ‘Who manages your time?’ But I share them to illustrate how time-consuming behaviour varies according to the way stars happen to be aligned. Sometimes, instead of ‘time pressure’ one experiences time inflation—a sort of a big bang of time to be filled. When I have felt the pressure of an unwelcome deadline I have worked with greater dispatch to complete the task, with results apparently still acceptable—leaving me secretly guilty and wishing I had had more time to do an even better job. (But sometimes the difference between ‘good’ [or ‘good enough’] and ‘better’ [or ‘best’] is discernible only to the person who has both of them side by side to compare.) That I have been fortunate not to have missed a deadline may be because I mostly do editing (infrequently working on *de novo* first drafts), control inflow mindfully, avoid amassing competing deadlines, and try to be realistic about the turnaround times I promise. And I usually set to work without dallying. Still, there are periods when the synchronism of long deadlines with the absence of short or pressing ones and a spate of time, as before or after a vacation or after a long and, therefore, exclusionary project (as a bout of on-site work recently in my case), sets the stage for vagarious time-filling—as opposed to behaviour that *uses* time.

So, several thoughts on such attacks and the behaviours I have observed during them:

1. ‘Laziness’ should not be used to characterise the behaviour, because one tends to fill time productively—for example, by reading down the stack of journals accumulated during dearer times. Nor should the behaviour be characterised as ‘procrastination’. Because one is not avoiding work, and one is certain that tasks will be accomplished by when they need to be.
2. Short, but reasonable, deadlines may (they most likely do) correlate with efficiency, the task benefiting from the extra surge of adrenaline, which does not happen during lax times. This effect may be a near cousin of stage fright, widely considered to enhance a performer’s art. Perhaps that is the brain’s self-imposed, subliminally contrived, and involuntarily activated way to achieve efficiency and focus.

3. Imagining that you might soon not have much to do, and therefore perhaps feel functionally irrelevant, if all present projects were completed, you may proactively be protracting their completion to obtain maximum mileage. Work expands to fill time¹.
4. The typical subject with too much time to manage in an organised way (as opposed to too little time) is like a guest at a smorgasbord who is high on the elixir of bountiful time and who randomly and seemingly whimsically is nibbling from this and that, flitting between dishes for short engagements, but never sitting down for a full meal. The priority given to any one of several equi-deadlined [sic] tasks, and the amount of time allocated to each before putting that one aside unfinished, would be an indicator of how attractive each task is. During such spells of dilated time, one serves the pleasure principle more eagerly than duty. And with less stress.

Finally, one other comment relevant to time management and scheduling work flow—this because an impatient client who did not want to pay for a rush job recently asked me why my turnaround time for editing a manuscript is 2 to 3 weeks, when my estimate of the time to edit his text was about six hours. Just before that exchange, I had posed a similar question to a carpenter, because I envisioned the repair in question would take less than a couple of hours. Sure enough, he gave ‘backlog’ as an excuse. And of course it is safe to predict that all trades people will always have backlogs, and never be able to do the work for the average client right away. Before entering university, I had a summer job in an independent clinical laboratory where I was told by the permanent senior technicians that I was wrongly hasty in giving the patient the test result right away². ‘Tell them to come back for it the following day. Or in the afternoon’. In providing the result of a practically instantaneous test to the client there was the real risk of demystifying the test in her mind, and devaluing it; which would make her wonder if she was not being overcharged.

Even if one could succeed (it is doable) to eliminate all backlog—for example by scheduling work so as to edit and return the average manuscript overnight, in doing work that has intellectual, even artistic aspects, there are more compelling reasons besides image and inflation of value to

1 This has been iterated and reiterated in so many places that it is common currency; and I am not bothering to document its original attribution, if such documentation is possible.
2 In those days, typing a blood sample could be done in less than 30 minutes after blood was drawn.

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string out the process. It will enhance the final product if after the first go-through (draft or revision) the project is put on the back burner to percolate a bit. It is much better for the manuscript (therefore providing greater personal satisfaction and pride of accomplishment, with less likelihood of clients or down-the-line editors discovering oversights). All manuscripts need editing (even many articles that have passed from the author on through a sequence of editors and have been published!). Therefore, a reasonable, generous turnaround time that allows revisiting a manuscript after a period of detachment should be built into the writing or editing process of medical manuscripts; and the need for it should be understood and accepted by clients. Hindsight is 20/20; but for it to work at that level, it requires that the glare and distraction of the initial spell be allowed to subside.

If done without loss of control, splitting time between diverse activities, now writing, now rewriting, now editing, then billing, and so on, helps postpone fatigue and boredom, so improving quality. But keep in mind that that may cause overall per page time efficiency to decline, just as accelerating and decelerating in stop-and-go traffic increases the energy consumption of a car. Still ...

A corollary of this issue's thematic question would be, 'What manages your time?' Atop the list of answers to that should be 'quality'.

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Keep it short

The p-values are of a purely exploratory nature.

You see this sentence every day and think it's fine. Of course, there is nothing grammatically wrong with it. We have a subject *The p-values* (let's not get into whether this is hyphenated or not, or whether the 'p' should be italic or capitalised), a verb *are*, and an adverbial phrase *of a purely exploratory nature*. But what does *purely* mean: p-values can certainly be confirmatory, but can they be *partially* exploratory? And why do we have to lend the *p-value* a *nature*, thereby forcing the reader to read more words than are necessary?

All we are saying here is that *The p-values are exploratory*.

By the way, I still like to stick with *exploratory* rather than *explorative*, but I note that the latter is rapidly gaining ground. Maybe another battle I shall give up on soon.

Alistair Reeves

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'Science' is one of the most difficult words in the English language

Masha Bell, a literacy researcher from Coventry University, UK, believes English is the worst of all alphabetical languages. She describes the English spelling system as 'absolutely, unspeakably awful'. Many words would be easier to read, let alone to write, merely by dropping some letters, e.g. the 'i' in 'friend' and the 'u' in 'shoulder'. The researcher sees English as being unique because the problems relate to reading and not just to spelling. This difference accounts for schoolchildren in the UK having poorer literacy results than the rest of Europe. Some words have the same pronunciation but different letter combinations, e.g. 'clean' and 'gene'. There are words that look the same but are pronounced differently, e.g. 'eight' and 'height'. Any move to simplify spelling would, however, be met with great resistance because people feel that spelling is linked to the origin of words. A list of 100 of the most difficult words is given in the source article below. Interestingly this includes the word 'science'. Some other words in the top 100 that can come up in medical writing are: vomit, properly, opposite, Monday, four, manage, month, once, almost, both, ghost, most, only, powder, salami.

Source: Asthana A. English is too hard to read for children. *The Observer* 8 June 2008. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/jun/08/schools.english>

Guest editor's note: I agree entirely with Ms. Bell. I would reform English spelling now, and not even wait (weight) until tomorrow! I wonder if she also goes into the ridiculous stigma attached to not being 'good at spelling' as an indicator of intelligence. I edit articles day-in day-out from highly educated (native) English speakers and often find spelling errors. If only English were (almost) phonetic like Spanish. Our lives would be a 'darn sight (site)' easier without this encumbrance to learning—and would our culture suffer? Not in the least.

Falling in love

Falling in love is not at all the most stupid thing that people do—but gravitation cannot be held responsible for it. Albert Einstein

People have been 'falling' in love since the early 16th Century but at that time 'fall' was not associated solely with descent. It also meant a sudden change from one to another mental or emotional state. This makes sense when you consider the even older expression of 'falling asleep' and that, of course, you can also fall out of love.

Source: Dunkling L. *Collins Dictionary of Curious Phrases*. 2004