As a graduate student, you might find yourself well on the way with your education and ‘ABD’ (all but dissertation). Day after day, you tell yourself that you really, really intend to start writing your paper. After all, you’ve collected all the data, analysed them many times and entered them into tables. But then you start thinking that maybe you need just a few more data. Perhaps, too, you should try a different analysis technique. And what if the tables you used aren’t the right ones, or need to be formatted differently?

Many of the thousands of researchers we have worked with are constantly being tripped up by finicky, niggling details that keep them from writing up their research. Every day, they mean to start, but every day, something gets in their way or seems more important — and this can go on for years. Some very common obstacles get in the way of high-quality, high-quantity scholarly writing, but powerful, evidence-based techniques can help researchers to overcome repetitive and unhelpful habits and get moving (see ‘How to get out of a dissertation-writing rut’).

WRITING MYTHS

The biggest impediments to scholarly writing are long-held myths that seem to get passed down through the academic ranks like precious but unhelpful ancient wisdom. The first is the Readiness Myth — “I should write when I feel ready, and I don’t feel ready yet”. The secret to high output is that you have to write before you feel ready, because you might never reach that point. Researchers read endlessly and conduct countless experiments in the belief that it will eventually make them feel ready to write — we call these habits readitis and experimentitis. But ironically, all that reading and experimenting often makes them less likely to write, and more confused. So the first way to speed up your writing is to stop waiting, stop reading and experimenting, and start writing. You won’t feel ready, but you have to do it anyway.

This brings us to the second myth, the Clarity Myth — “I should get it all clear in my head first, and then write it down”. This isn’t how writing works in practice. You have probably had the experience in which you were sure about how a paper would go until you started to write it. Then you discovered that there were inconsistencies, or it didn’t flow well or the links didn’t make sense. This tells you that it wasn’t all that coherent in your head, after all. In fact, writing clarifies your thinking. Writing is not recording — you don’t just take
Better teaching needed

The United States must boost the number of people pursuing degrees and careers in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM), says a 23 June report from the National Academies. The nation should foster better education in schools, said the report, Successful K–12 STEM Education: Identifying Effective Approaches in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. The authors also recommend improving STEM literacy to fill STEM-related jobs that do not require advanced degrees, such as science teacher or engineering technician. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics says that only 4 of the 16 STEM-related jobs with the largest projected growth by 2018 need an advanced degree.

TOP TIPS

How to get out of a dissertation–writing rut

● Write before you feel ready — because you might never feel ready. It’s amazing how people magically feel ready when there is an imminent deadline.

● Don’t wait to have a clear picture of the paper. As you start putting down your ideas, you may actually clarify them.

● Snack write — work in short, frequent bursts instead of waiting to sit down for big blocks of time. Those blocks hardly ever come, and when they do, they don’t usually get used very productively.

● Set specific times in your schedule for writing — don’t leave it to chance, because chances are it won’t happen.

● Writing means putting new words on the page or substantially rewriting old words. It does not mean editing, reading, referencing or formatting — and it definitely does not mean composing e-mails.

● If you refrain from writing because you worry that what you write won’t be good enough, try noting the adage that to write well, you first have to write.

● To really increase the quality and quantity of your writing, get feedback from mentors and colleagues — it can be painful, but it works.

Maria Gardiner and Hugh Kearns lecture and research in psychology at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia, and run workshops for graduate students and advisers (see ithinkwell.com.au).