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# Great expectations: our writing tendencies for actionable self-knowledge

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# Great expectations: four writing tendencies for actionable self-knowledge

**Carina Buckley**
Solent University, UK

**Alicja Syska**
University of Plymouth, UK

## *Presentation abstract*

We all know that writing for publication is a valuable activity and one that many of us aspire to. We have previously presented it as a form of liberatory practice for Learning Development (Syska and Buckley, 2022) showing how it allows us to shape and develop our ideas as part of a wider conversation in LD, and how in doing so it helps to build the field and our own professional profiles. Yet many of us struggle to write. We explored some of the reasons behind this in a small study and although lack of time is consistently cited as a factor, we believe the root of the issue lies in managing the expectations we have for ourselves alongside those that others have for us and, most crucially, how we respond to those.

In her book *The Four Tendencies*, Gretchen Rubin identified that internal and external expectations, enmeshed with our particular predisposition when it comes to responding to tasks, go far to explain 'why we act and why we don't act' (Rubin, 2017, p.12). While her Tendencies relate to the four possible combinations of meeting or not meeting inner and outer expectations generally, we have translated this specifically to writing as a way of understanding why many people struggle to write and how they can be supported. The four writing tendencies we have identified – Strivers, Pragmatists, Actualisers and Freelancers – have their own blocks to writing, but also have their own strategies for effectively overcoming those blocks. In this presentation we therefore outlined the nature of the four writing tendencies, helped participants identify their own, and showed how self-knowledge can have a significant impact on our approach to writing, which we can then pass on to our students.

**Keywords:** writing; expectations; identity.

## *Community response*

Who am I as a writer? And what can finding out more about that do for me? This session tapped into delegates' curiosity about their own writing identities, and enabled analysis of their writing self and their relationship with writing. The activities in the session enabled reflection and analysis, and insights into writers' own processes. The quiz devised by the authors was inspired by Gretchen Rubin's Four Tendencies quiz, which readers can find at https://gretchenrubin.com/quiz/the-four-tendencies-quiz/.The community responses were enthusiastic, and demonstrated that delegates had connected personally with the session, with their written responses often being reflective themselves.

> When the four writing tendencies were first explained I immediately thought I was a combination of Actualiser and Pragmatist. However, as the concepts were developed through the mini self-assessment quiz, I observed that I was more of a Striver than an Actualiser (with a few Pragmatist tendencies). This really surprised me as I have never really considered myself as a writer and always thought I was quite bad at it. However, on further reflection I realise that it is actually something I do very often (such as writing newsletters and blogs for our team), but I did not associate it as 'proper writing'. I did not fully identify with the effective strategies suggested for each of the tendencies as I find that I use a combination of all of the strategies to aid my writing. I did note that the Freelancer tendency and suggested writing strategies might be a useful tool to use when mentoring students with ADHD characteristics. Interestingly, when I followed the link to Rubin's Four Tendencies quiz, my main tendency was an 'Obliger' which supported my initial feelings. I will be interested in reading the full chapter and hope that the self-assessment element will be developed further.

Engagement and enjoyment was clear; responses suggested positive developments for delegates in terms of their relationship with writing:

I thoroughly enjoyed this session. As soon as I saw the categories I knew I would be a Striver. It was so interesting to see myself in the examples and to identify further ways in which I keep writing!

Loved this, it made so many things clear with my own relationship with writing. Nice to see that my potential writing partner and I are also a 'Striver + Actualiser' pairing (like Alicja and Carina) and so there is hope for us yet!

The conversation continued on Twitter, with delegates fascinated by the tendencies, finding their own relationship with them, and applying this to their writing partnerships and behaviours:

**Figure 1. Tweet from Jacqui Bartram.**
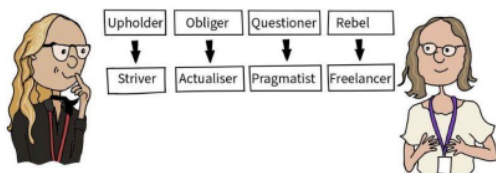


Others, meanwhile, not only found it useful for themselves, but also suggested its value for work with students:

**Figure 2. Tweet from Beth Garrett.**



The session clearly resonated with members of the community, provoking interest and reflection, and perhaps invigorating relationships with writing.

## Next steps and additional questions

This session very much captured the interest in writing, and a connection between self-identity and the act of writing. Delegates' excitement is clear from their responses, and there is real engagement with the self-evaluative process. The authors are both keen advocates of writing in the LD community, and this session appeared to foster enthusiasm and engagement with the process. Learning more about ourselves as writers was clearly valuable to delegates. How can we further harness this self-knowledge? The strategies suggested in the session support each 'type' of writer; could our new self-awareness be furthered through a collaboratively-created collection of strategies which writers report work well for each 'type'? Could we/should we try specific combinations of writer types for specific purposes?

## *Authors' reflection*

We're glad that the writing tendencies framework resonated with delegates – we also found it useful in understanding ourselves and each other better, and as such it's been valuable for our ongoing collaboration. It would also work really well with students and we'd love to see that develop. There are so many reasons for student resistance to writing (as well as our own), and this framework can provide the objectivity and distance needed to talk about something that can be emotionally fraught, in a safe and blame-free way.

One of the reasons that prompted this work in the first place is that too many Learning Developers don't think of themselves as writers. Writing, especially for publication, can feel elusive, oppressive and intimidating enough to put off those who aren't required to do it, despite the field needing more people to share their ideas and experiences, to theorise what they do, and to demarcate and then push the boundaries of what Learning Development is. This is why we wrote a chapter on it in our forthcoming co-edited book (Syska and Buckley, 2023) – to encourage and support Learning Developers in their writing. For one of the delegates to identify that their writing didn't feel like 'proper writing' exemplifies exactly what we're trying to overcome – all writing counts, and all dissemination is valuable, and it is truly gratifying to know that this session sparked a flame of recognition in this delegate.

Ultimately, this is another way for us to learn something more about ourselves and our relationship with writing, and to not feel that we have to press on regardless of struggle or even antipathy. If we have difficulties or frustrations in our writing, then it might be a case of finding a more suitable writing partner (or none!) or a better fitting project. We have suggested strategies, but there are others, and we hope that this – like our writing itself – is purely the start of a longer, more involved, community-based conversation.

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## Author details

Carina Buckley is currently Instructional Design Manager at Solent University and a Principal Fellow of AdvanceHE. An active advocate for LD institutionally, regionally, nationally and internationally, Carina has held posts as Co-Chair and Treasurer for the Association for Learning Development in HE (ALDinHE) and is a prolific author, editor and collaborator.

Alicja Syska is a hybrid academic, combining the roles of Learning Developer and Lecturer in Education and History at the University of Plymouth. She is interested in the processes involved in writing, especially for publication, and its impact on professional identity.

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