

ADVICE

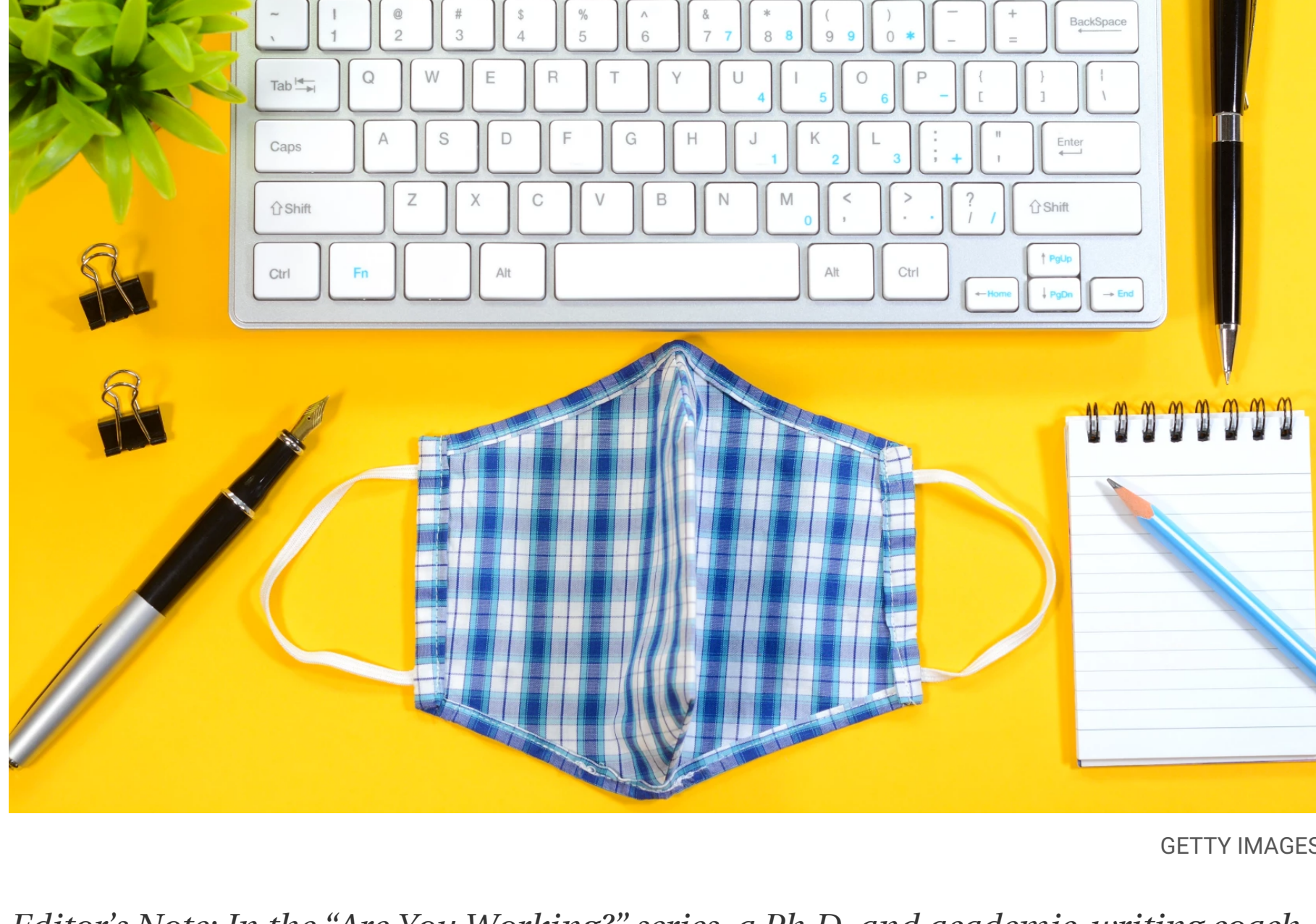


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# Now I Have to Write a ‘Covid Impact Statement’?

An academic-writing specialist answers your questions on pandemic-productivity quandaries.

By [Rebecca Schuman](#) | MAY 21, 2021



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*Editor's Note: In the "Are You Working?" series, a Ph.D. and academic-writing coach answers questions from faculty members and graduate students about scholarly motivation and productivity. This month's questions arrived via [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#). Read her previous columns [here](#).*

**Question: The past year has obliterated my productivity, and I am languishing, at best. Now my university wants me to write a 'Covid Impact Statement' so that I can qualify for a course release in the fall. I am beyond burnt out and desperate for the time free from teaching, but whenever I even start to write this thing, all I want to do is just curl up in the corner of my bed. What should it even say? How do I begin?**

**Signed,  
Please Release Me**

Dear Pre-Release:

How's that for irony? In order to keep hanging on by your fingernails after a literal year of hanging on by your fingernails, the Powers That Be on your campus now want you to do what compassionate pedagogues explicitly tell faculty members not to make students do — prove your trauma.

Other than being patently invasive and another encroachment upon time you did not have in the first place — hence the Covid impact — the Covid Impact Statement is also heavily problematic because it requires you to essentially lay bare, in brutal detail, the greatest failures of your past year and then put it in your permanent employment file, a place where, historically, the slightest sign of weakness could mean the end of your career.

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For generations, academics have been expected to suck it up during the semester and keep working, whether that be through the death of a family member, pregnancy loss, postpartum depression, or struggles with chronic illness. When it comes to qualifying for tenure and promotion — or, in this case, for a temporary release from one or more of your teaching obligations — the most accurate word that comes to mind to describe the review process is “ruthless.” And so where, exactly, in that ruthless landscape does the Covid Impact Statement fit? Yes, of course, your administration can't just dole out course releases like Oprah handed out Pontiacs, so documentation is, strictly speaking, important. But still, after all these years of soldiering on, *now* suddenly everyone is supposed to win the Trauma Olympics?

The first thing you should know about Covid Impact Statements: Just like so much else with this Godforsaken pandemic, there is no way to know if your administration is going to be compassionate, regardless of what you write. So my main advice on writing a statement like this is:

- Write it quickly.
- Write it honestly but without pathos.
- Then send it, and never think about it again.

In your introduction, make sure to emphasize all the heroic work you *did* manage to pull off — in teaching and advising a lot of stressed-out students or in maintaining your research in less-than-optimal conditions. Then point out that those efforts came at the expense of work on longer-term projects, such as articles or books. (It also came at the expense of your well-being, but trust me, the administration does not want to read 300 sob stories, however true and relevant they are.) So, something like:

- *The Covid-19 pandemic has affected my ability to perform several key aspects of my position on a temporary basis. I prioritized tasks that were unable to be rescheduled but served the immediate needs of [fill in the blank: my students, my lab, my postdocs, etc.]. By continuing to [teach successfully in a remote environment and/or maintain my experiments while unable to enter the lab physically], I was able to prevent substantial loss of [learning and/or research]. However, this triage necessitated the postponement of numerous longer-term projects and publications that have now become urgent, and which I now require course-release time to fulfill.*

In your body paragraphs, you want to — again, as matter-of-factly as possible — enumerate any medical emergencies you or members of your family had directly related to the pandemic, as well as any logistical problems you faced related to child care (schools being closed, or hybrid) or whatever other messy life challenges befell you.

Keep in mind that pandemic parenting issues are a touchy subject. Parents from all over the political spectrum are rabidly emotional about schools not being open (or equally rabid about them remaining closed). The administrator reading your statement may well be a parent, too, so you do not want to assume any position in the Closure Wars. Again, stick to the facts. When you get your much-needed course release, then you will finally have time to feel your feelings.

**Question: You're always suggesting that we work on our writing and research for some absurdly short amount of time — 25 minutes a day, an hour, four hours maximum. Everyone around me seems to be working all the time and I'm not. What's wrong with you?**

**Signed,  
Skeptical**

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Dear Skeptic,

There are an infinite amount of things wrong with me, but my reasonable and humane work goals are not one of them. Everyone around you seems to be working all the time because they are performing the act of being busy — or, more accurately, those who *actually* have the energy to perform business are doing so. You have no idea what's *really* going on with these folks. Chances are, they spend five hours a day doomscrolling, or taking what I have decided to call “stress naps,” while their children ransack *Animal Crossing* islands instead of doing virtual school. So the impulse that you “should” be working more to keep up with some mythical academic Joneses is unproductive to indulge.

I first wrote about writing productivity in these pages back in 2018, and explained the strategy that I use myself and recommend to my academic clients: Summon 25 minutes of laser focus on your work, one to three times during your work day. The 25-minute thing has a purpose: It is to train your body and mind to make space for your research during days where you ordinarily would not. It's the push-ups-and-sit-ups montage in your own personal *Rocky*. If you're already dedicating 25 minutes a day to your writing and research, and you're still worried about making a deadline, then you'll probably have to turn to additional strategies. But if you've been suffering from writer's block, then expecting your writing time to go from zero to 13 hours a day is, guess what, a great way to keep you blocked.

When I recommend people set aside an hour — or, ideally, 90 minutes — that, too, has a purpose: It is to show you that working consistently for a small but significant amount of time will be enough to meet your deadlines. It's a direct rejoinder to the usual idea that on teaching or grading days, you should just give up on even trying to do research or write, and instead treat all of your academic-calendar breaks and vacations as the time when you're “finally going to get some writing done.” Stop sully the concept of vacation with that nonsense.

As for my four-hour maximum, I strongly believe that unless you're coding data or running a time-intensive experiment (science!), any more than four substantive hours of writing/research time — especially in the humanities or humanistic social sciences — is going to result in diminishing returns of quality. Think about it: Would you rather read a student paper that was written in a six-hour binge right before it was due (i.e., the vast majority of student papers) ... or a mythical unicorn of a student paper that was actually written slowly, over time, being thought about carefully?

I get that if you're in a “flow state” you don't want to stop, and the occasional binge is fine so long as you build in a rest day afterward. But truly, four actual solid substantive hours of intellectual labor should fully tucker you out, and you should feel absolutely empowered to clock out for the day.

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.*

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