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The Power of Play

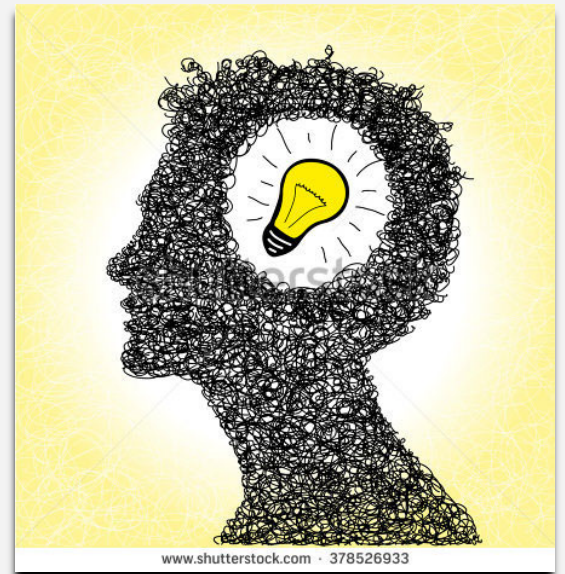
CREATIVE PATHS TO GREATER PRODUCTIVITY

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If you can write a paper from start to finish in a single sitting, then you have some serious **fortitude!** But with most assignments, especially lengthier and more complex ones, quality will almost always suffer.

The rest of us recognize how important breaks and resting periods are to our writing process. But have you ever considered the most **constructive way to use such breaks?** In fact researchers have found—and I agree with them—that you can use these resting periods in ways that *are still constructive* for the writing process.

In particular, kinesthetic learning during 'breaks' (the use of physical movement in academic environments) has valuable benefits for writing; you can access those benefits through **play**, both to generate ideas in and of themselves as well as to reward yourself for a job well done.



Why Play? (Aren't I Supposed to Be *Working?*)

Ask yourself these questions:

- ◆ Am I ever unable to concentrate while writing a paper?
- ◆ Is it ever difficult for me to think of new or original ideas, or how my various ideas connect to one another, as I write?
- ◆ When I am trying to focus on my writing, do I bounce my leg, fidget with my fingers, or often move obsessively in other ways?

If you answered **YES** to any of these questions, then integrating play into your writing process could pay real dividends.

It's a fact of life: humans get distracted, humans get bored, humans have physiological needs, and humans like to move. So how do we get anything done, especially tasks as difficult as academic writing? According to my research into the work of psychologists and educational theorists such as Lev Vygotsky, Michael Ellis, and Chad Verbaix, we get things done by turning to play itself *during* our active writing—especially for sparking ideas—as well as incorporating it as a constructive *break from* and *reward after* that writing...

Play as an Idea Generator

Being able to create compelling ideas, especially in a time crunch, can be challenging. In my scholarship as a Writing Fellow, I've studied how to use play creatively and effectively to generate ideas while writing papers.

Scholars have found playing with toys helps writers redirect stress and nervous energy to a tangible object, opening the door for creative ideas to flow.

Generating ideas is an essential stage of the writing process, yet it is so easy to get stuck there. Next time you feel blocked—lacking ideas or feeling anxious about what you're writing—take a ten minute break! Throw a ball with a friend, spin a fidget spinner, or play a quick game of cards. These active, focused forms of **play** engage your body and mind, helping you relax. Once your mind reaches this point of relaxation, it will generate ideas more quickly, and you can turn immediately to getting them down in your writing.

EFFECTIVE PLAY

- ♦ **Doesn't require too much thought.** Isn't that why you're taking a break from your writing in the first place?
- ♦ **Doesn't take over your day.** Leave some time for writing!
- ♦ **Is fun for you!** Don't throw a football around if you hate football. It's just not productive.
- ♦ **Leaves you feeling more relaxed afterward.** But napping, while valuable, does *not* equal play!

SOME EXAMPLES

- ♦ **Active Play:** shooting hoops, playing catch, jump-roping, dancing—just get moving. Releasing those endorphins will make returning to work easier!
- ♦ **Sensory Play:** fidget spinners, play-dough, etc—anything that activates different senses!
- ♦ **Engaging Play:** video and internet games, puzzles, cards, jenga—exercise your mind in a different direction. You'll be surprised what sorts of ideas about your writing come to mind!

Play as a Motivator

Very few people in this world can sit down and write long, complex, *worthwhile* essays straight through for hours and hours on end. That is just not a thing.

Everyone needs motivation. For us, as students, it may be as basic as needing to pass a class—an external motivator. Motivators can also be intrinsic—the pleasure we receive, for instance, from our own sense of accomplishment. Regardless, the lesson to learn is that when we are strategic about recognizing and including different forms of motivation and reward in our academic work, we become more productive.

What motivates you to get your work done? Grades? Fear of reprimand? Desire to pass a course? **These are all legitimate motivators, but we can use play as motivator, too.**

Setting an extrinsic motivator—something tangible to look forward to for reaching the end of your work or different 'checkpoints' along the way—will help you to actually write your paper. Use that new Xbox game to motivate you. Building in constructive rewards throughout an assignment boosts both morale and confidence. Consider setting a word or page goal and reward yourself with some play once you've reached it—it's also an excellent idea to make a pact with a friend who's got their own work. That will help you both keep on track.

Always pursue excellence. Just remember that relaxation and enjoyment are also part of the process!

