Frustrated academic writers

Helen Sword, Evija Trofimova & Madeleine Ballard

To cite this article: Helen Sword, Evija Trofimova & Madeleine Ballard (2018) Frustrated academic writers, Higher Education Research & Development, 37:4, 852-867, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2018.1441811

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1441811

Published online: 27 Feb 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 907

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles
Frustrated academic writers

Helen Sword, Evija Trofimova and Madeleine Ballard

Department of English and Drama, Centre for Learning and Research in Higher Education, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand;
Department of English, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

ABSTRACT
This paper aims to start a conversation about a common yet under-examined emotion experienced by academic writers worldwide: frustration. What is frustration, exactly? What are its causes and effects, its symptoms and its cures? Is frustration an impediment to writing or a motivational impetus? Can academic writers vanquish frustration, or must we merely learn to live with it? Mirroring rather than mastering the complexities of this multifaceted emotion, we have structured our inquiry as a multiple-entry maze where frustration unfolds beyond each threshold as uncharted terrain: a place of neurological explanations, playful etymological twists and metaphorical metamorphoses. The paper re-enacts our own collaborative journey through the maze, meditating on and modelling some of the frustration-easing strategies that we developed along the way.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 September 2017
Accepted 28 January 2018

KEYWORDS
Academic writing; academic work; emotion

You were supposed to have the article finished two months ago. But one of your co-authors has been ill, and other commitments have jostled their way into spaces reserved for writing: an overdue book review, an emergency staffing meeting. Your Masters student has just sent you her fifth draft; your partner called to say the roof is leaking. Still, here you are at last, seated in front of your computer on a rainy Friday afternoon, ready to take on that recalcitrant introductory section. You scan the paragraph that you drafted last time – how could four weeks have passed so quickly? – and frown. The keyboard clacks impatiently as you move some words around, type a few new sentences, overwrite them. Ideas that seemed vivid and exciting when you and your co-authors first discussed them have congealed on the page like scrambled eggs gone cold. Inspiration, then discipline, wander off for a coffee as you stare out the window into the gathering darkness. Your department chair reminded you yesterday that you are low on peer-reviewed publications; you cannot afford any more delays. The branches of a tree scrape like bony fingers against the glass, tracing your frustration in rivulets of rainwater.

Sound familiar? Whether or not this scholarly scenario resonates closely with your own life, the chances are good that, at some stage in your academic career, you have experienced writing-related frustration. In a recent study of academic writers from across the disciplines and around the world, frustration emerged as their most commonly felt emotion, mentioned nearly twice as often as the next most frequently cited emotion.
But what is frustration, exactly? And why are academic writers so frustrated? A review of the research literature from fields such as cognitive psychology, neuroscience and linguistics revealed little consensus as to the causes, the symptoms or even the definition of frustration. Nor were we able to find a single study in the higher education literature that deals exclusively or comprehensively with the nature of frustration for scholarly writers, despite a growing interdisciplinary interest in affect studies. While a number of researchers have investigated emotion in academic writing, frustration is mentioned only in passing in their studies, if at all (See, e.g., on undergraduates: Brand, 1990; White, 2013; on postgraduate students: Aitchison, Catterall, Ross, & Burgin, 2012; Burford, 2017; Cotterall, 2013; Cozart, Jensen, Wichmann-Hansen, Kupatadze, & Chien-Hsiung Chiu, 2015; on academics: Boice, 1990; Cameron, Nairn, & Higgins, 2009; DeCastro, Sambuco, Ubel, Stewart, & Jagsi, 2013). Our attempts to make sense of academic frustration proved, in a word, frustrating.

Initially we floundered, unable to find our way into such a mercurial, multifaceted topic. Is writing-related frustration a single, definable emotion or a grab-bag concept with multiple meanings? A neurological imperative or a cultural construct? An impediment to writing or a motivational force? Gradually, however, our own frustration gave way to fascination. Shifting from a paradigm of discovery to one of playfulness, we began to dwell and dance in the questions raised by our research. There was something exhilarating as well as disconcerting, we found, about venturing into uncharted intellectual terrain with no methodological map to guide us. Scholarly writing is, after all, ‘emotional work’ (Aitchison et al., 2012, p. 438), and the intrusion of conflicting emotions into our own writing process seemed a fitting response to our topic.

Taking our cue from experimental higher education scholarship that employs form in the service of content – for example, by mimicking the stages of an argument in classical rhetoric (Connors & Lunsford, 1988) or moving through the hours in an academic’s day (Kelly, 2015) – we have structured our paper as a maze with five entrances, five exits and a Minotaur at the centre: frustration itself personified (taurified? bullified?) as a mythical, half-human monster that threatens to devour all those who enter its lair (see Figure 1). The article enacts our own wayfinding through the maze, guiding our readers through the sometimes enlightening, sometimes confusing realms of qualitative analysis, neuropsychology, linguistics, metaphor and myth, respectively. We do not propose to slay the Minotaur, nor even to tame it. Instead, we suggest ways in which we might cohabit with frustration by acknowledging its looming shadow even while sidling safely past toward our destination.

1. Frustration by numbers

Our journey into the maze began with a fat stack of 1223 ethics-approved anonymous questionnaires collected from academic staff (53%), postgraduate students (25%), research fellows (15%) and other writers (7%) in 15 countries (Australia, Canada, Denmark, England, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Scotland, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand and the United States) as part of a four-year research project on the writing habits of successful academics. (For further details, see Sword, 2017). When participants were asked to identify the main emotions that they associate with their academic writing, nearly one-third of respondents (357 out of 1223) mentioned frustration or one of its variants (frustrated, frustrating):
Frustration when I don’t get time for [writing].

Frustrated … [that I] can’t seem to find the right words.

Bit of frustration – why can’t I write things faster? How hard can it be?

Frustration seemed to denote not just a single emotion but a whole slew of feelings, mostly connected to or conflated with anger, disappointment or helplessness:

I often go through periods of frustration (anger!)

When I don’t respect my planning, I get frustrated.

Frustration [that as] a non-native speaker I feel … limited in my vocabulary.
For some respondents, frustration was a motivator ‘for the following day’, a saggy spot between *anticipation* and *breakthrough*, a bedfellow with *satisfaction* and *enjoyment*. For others, however, it was a purely demoralising and disabling feeling, connected with *despair*, *futility*, *dread* and even *self-hate*. Academic frustration thus revealed itself as a deeply contradictory emotion: at once a prompt for energy and a site of resistance; a stimulant and a depressant; a mere field to cross and a bog in which to flounder.

Psychologists define frustration as a psychological response to an obstacle introduced between a subject and his or her goal (Coon & Mitterer, 2010; Eysenck, 2000; Janis, 1971). What obstacles, we wondered, did academics perceive as blocking the path to their writing goals, and who or what put them there? After filtering out responses that mentioned frustration without speculating on its cause – for example, ‘frustrated when the writing is going badly’ or ‘love, pain, frustration, enthusiasm’ – we noted 222 responses that identified the source of their writing frustration. Of these, roughly one-third (34%) associated frustration with an externally imposed obstacle beyond their own control, while the remaining two-thirds (66%) described it as an internal impediment, such as an aversion to writing or a lack of competence (see Figure 2).

Among writers who regarded their frustration as externally imposed, the greatest number (20%) bemoaned their lack of time due to teaching, administrative and family responsibilities: ‘3 small children and administrative post(s) leave little time/capacity for writing projects’. Others recorded frustrations involving other people, such as unhelpful feedback from reviewers (4%) or the politics of co-authorship and collegiality (2%). The ‘boring’, ‘restrictive’, and even ‘convoluted’ writing style demanded by academe also proved a source of frustration (4%), alongside a general sense of a ‘lack of … direction & guidance’ (4%).

Respondents who ascribed their frustration to internal sources most frequently mentioned a struggle with craft. One quarter of the 222 responses (25%) expressed a feeling of being inarticulate: ‘the sentences don’t flow’; ‘I can’t express my ideas in words’. Some non-native English speakers noted the challenge of writing in a second language: ‘I have to correct a lot’ (6%). Respondents also reported frustration with their own

![Figure 2. Internal and external causes of academic writers’ frustration (n = 222).](image-url)
inefficiency and procrastination tendencies (16%), with writer’s block (4%), with the infuriating slowness of the writing process (7%) and with the difficulty of getting started (8%):

I tend to go on Facebook.

I feel … stuck.

[It] takes an eternity.

Frustration at the blank page.

In nearly all these cases, it seemed, personal shortcomings were to blame. Frustration about writing was the writer’s own fault: private, solitary and a sign of inadequacy.

On closer inspection, however, we noted that such internally imposed frustrations often reflected a perceived failure to measure up to externally imposed standards. Frustration at one’s own inefficiency presupposes some external, ideal efficiency; frustration at one’s inability to produce perfect prose suggests a belief that someone else, somewhere, can achieve such a feat (see Trofimova, 2017). Frustration has long been recognised as being influenced by social context (Coon & Mitterer, 2010; Maier & Ellen, 1956; Tavris, 1989) and especially by ‘modern Anglo culture, with its emphasis on goals, plans, and expected achievements’ (Wierzbicka, 1999, p. 72). Likewise, numerous scholars have noted the corrosive effect of neoliberal values on academic identity and emotional affect (Beard, Clegg, & Smith, 2007; Chubb, Watermeyer, & Wakeling, 2017), particularly in regard to academic writing (see, for example, Johnson, Roitman, Morgan, & MacLeod, 2017; Nairn et al., 2015). The questionnaire responses betray not just personal frustration but a broader, suppressed frustration with the entire professional context in which academic writers operate: the high socio-intellectual and publishing expectations, the culture of comparison and the perceived isolation.

With this realisation, we can glimpse a way through the maze. If the biggest obstacles to productive writing are culturally imposed expectations, then our navigational aids, too, may lie beyond ourselves. Recognising that we are not alone in our frustration offers us a first step towards the light: many of our respondents bemoaned ‘personal failings’ that they in fact shared with scores of others. The maze is full of academics looking for an exit, and many have found one before. Perhaps, then, the solution is to look for other writers; ask them for maps and compasses; hold their hands. Like other paralysing writing-related emotions (anxiety, shame, inadequacy), frustration swells with solitude but shrinks in the face of solidarity.

2. The neuropsychology of frustration

Neuroscience offers another route into the maze, helping us better understand the extent to which frustration is inherently part of mammalian nature (and so itself a somewhat wild and untameable beast). Although the opaque terrain of the human brain has only been roughly mapped so far, neuropsychological explanations for frustration may prove liberating for tormented writers, pointing to solutions more helpful than common self-help book advice urging us to write daily, write more, be more disciplined and so forth.
Neuroscientists link frustration to a basic ‘foraging / exploration / investigation / curiosity / interest / expectancy’ circuit characteristic to all mammals and known as the reward-SEEKING system (Panksepp, 1998, p. 145). Positive expectations, and therefore the possibility of frustration, arise from neurodynamic activities of higher brain areas that compute reward contingencies (Panksepp, 1998, p. 191). The mid-brain SEEKING system pathway roughly corresponds with the brain’s dopamine pathways (see Figure 3). When the system is activated, dopamine neurons fire. Mammals and humans alike feel arousal in anticipation of their reward, an addictive and pleasurable feeling that can be self-stimulated. Perhaps, when we start to write, we anticipate the reward (a finished chapter, an academic publication) too soon or too much?

When expectations are unfulfilled, the dopamine firing ceases; instead, neural patterns of frustration get activated, inciting anger via downward neural influences in the RAGE system, the neural circuitry of aggression (Panksepp, 1998, p. 189). The pathways of these systems are deeply wired within our brain. Primary and instinctual, they link us to other mammals. (Picture a frustrated mouse that cannot get to its cheese). Perhaps this hard-wiring also explains the irritation we feel when we are unable to grasp what lies seemingly within our reach: a forgotten word on the tip of our tongue, the right phrase for expressing what we mean to say.

Neuroscience that groups us with rodents teaches us the value of primaeval frustration-induced anger. The evolutionary function of such anger was to increase one’s competitiveness for resources; not getting the expected results propels us to work harder. (Think of small children and their perseverance in reaching what they want). As experiments with fox squirrels suggest, frustration-anger (and often aggression) can help us accumulate energy in order to ‘brute-force’ a new solution to a problem (Delgado & Jacobs, 2016). At the same time, however, constant experiences of frustration may harm the body and mind,
leading to emotional distress, pain and ‘internally generated sadness’ (Abler, Walter, & Erk, 2005, p. 672).

The unique capacity of the human brain to perform higher cognitive functions works here as a double-edged sword. On the positive side, we can channel our frustration at external circumstances (social injustice, unfair work conditions) into creative action, prompting beneficial change. We can also reduce feelings of frustration by deliberately harnessing positive thoughts and engaging in activities that boost serotonin or oxytocin levels in our bodies. On the negative side, however, humans are the only animals capable of increasing the RAGE circuit activity in their brains by responding to purely symbolic gestures, memories or anticipated scenarios. A rodent cannot reflect on and theorise frustration; nor can it be prompted by imaginary objects into feeling angry or becoming depressed (Davis, 1997; Panksepp, 1998, p. 190).

Of course, we cannot really compare a squirrel’s frustration at not being able to reach a hidden walnut to an academic’s frustration at abstract obstacles such as lack of time, self-discipline or institutional support. Goals such as scholarly recognition are mostly immaterial and invisible, quite different from the rodent’s concrete, material goal of getting its paws on a nut hidden inside a box. Although academic frustration may also arise from failure to achieve more measurable tasks, such as publishing a manuscript or drafting a coherent paragraph, writing is a creative act, and the obstacles to its completion are numerous, unknown and invisible. When we get stuck, we do not always know why. Am I blocked, or am I simply tired? The lines between various causes of frustration – physical versus emotional, psychological versus neurological – can become very blurry indeed, if they exist at all.

There is a tension, then, between the opportunities that our higher cognitive abilities open up for us and the obstacles they set in our way. The physiological, psychological and neurological complexities of who we are as humans are reflected in the architecture of the brain itself. Despite the convenience of thinking of the brain in terms of hemispheres, lobes and other identifiable ‘chunks’, it is actually more like a centreless maze.

Neuroscience or neuropsychology alone cannot provide simple solutions to the ‘problem’ of frustration. However, by recognising the intricacies of neural mechanisms, we can learn to accept frustration as a normal part of human experience. This means acknowledging a part of ourselves that can at times be uncontrollable, inexplicable and even paradoxical. As neurologist Alice W. Flaherty (2004) reminds us, sometimes even in psychiatric therapy, the goal ‘is not to help people make sense of their lives, but to help them make less sense of them – to break a few links in the narrative chain so that behaviour can be more unpredictable and creative’ (p. 219). If frustration embodies human nature in all its complexity, we might do better to submit to its intriguing twists and turns than to anxiously seek a way out.

3. Frustration in language

Language – our next doorway into the maze – is frustration exemplified: a shifting yet intractable barrier between our ideas and our expression of them, between where we are and where we want to go. Little wonder, then, that the word frustration should itself prove a site of linguistic slippage, an elusive and ambiguous signifier. Entering the meandering corridors of its etymologies, definitions and translations, we found ourselves
in a place that resembles not a classical maze so much as a carnival funhouse, a disorienting place of tilting floors, shifting walls and distorting mirrors. In the spirit of John Barth’s (1980) eponymous short story of postmodern teenage angst, we allowed ourselves to get temporarily ‘lost in the funhouse’ of language before stumbling out the other side, slightly giddy but wiser than before.

3.1. The spinning disc (a circular conversation on origins)

Evija: We have no record of the birth of the word frustration, nor of the concept. Which came first – the emotion or the word?
Madeleine: According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the earliest known root of the modern word frustration was the Latin frustra, meaning ‘in vain’ and also ‘in error’.
Evija: So to be frustrated can mean to have done something in error? Frustration results from a mistake?
Helen: In that case, is frustration related to failure? Or fallacy?
Madeleine: Well, the Online Latin Dictionary tells us that both words come from the Latin fallo, meaning ‘to deceive’, ‘to disappoint’, or ‘to fail’. I think we could argue there is some connection; frustration implies having been disappointed in an expectation.
Evija: When you frustrate me in my writing, you put an obstacle in my way so that I fail in achieving my objective.
Madeleine: Yes, metaphorically. But there’s no etymological link between frustration and fallacy, as far as I can see – whereas we do know that frustra is the root of two other modern words, frustration and fraud.
Helen: So to be frustrated means to feel defrauded?
Madeleine: Perhaps - but frustration (via frustro/frustrare) primarily means ‘to disappoint’. Fraud, on the other hand, comes via fraus, a noun meaning ‘cheating’ or ‘cheater’.
Helen: Wasn’t Fraus the Roman goddess of treachery? She hung around with Mercury, the god of thieves, and was depicted with a woman’s face, the body of a snake and a scorpion’s sting on her tail.
Evija: She is harmful. In Latin, fraus also meant ‘injury’, ‘harm’. When someone deceives you, they harm you.
Helen: But remember, the Latin root of frustration, frustra, is an adjective that also means ‘for nothing, to no purpose, without cause, uselessly’. Its first meaning was ‘in vain’.
Evija: So, in this case, frustra fluctuates between two semantic opposites: doing something without a result, and doing something without a cause?
Madeleine: Yes, and there’s also a sense of ‘nullification’ – which I believe frustration carried in mid-fifteenth century English.
Evija: I’m getting all turned around now. We seem to be in the Garden of Errors, the Irrgarten.
Helen: That’s the German word for a labyrinth or maze, isn’t it?

3.2. The hall of mirrors (reflections on translation)

Many modern languages, lacking a word to express the contemporary meaning of frustration as a state of annoyed impotence, have borrowed or transliterated the English word:
Afrikaans frustrasie
Bosnian frustracija
Czech frustrace
Estonian frustratsioon
Haitian Creole fristrasyon
Indonesian frustrasi
Irish frustrachas
Serbian фрустрација
etc.

Bilingual dictionaries may supply additional translations for frustration, but those words generally fail to convey the subtleties of the contemporary English word. In Latvian, for example, the loanword frustrācija is sometimes informally preferred over the Latvian vilšanās (roughly equivalent to the English disappointment), as the conceptual and semantic nuances of frustration cannot be expressed through disappointment alone. In German, where dictionary translations such as Zerschlagung (breaking up, destruction) and Enttäuschung (disappointment) provide inadequate substitutes, the English noun frustration has spawned not just one cognate but three: Frustration, Frust and the more obscure Frustrierung.

Cognitive linguists Soriano and Ogarkova (2012) point to frustration as an example of cultural specificity in language and emotion, calling it a ‘highly prototypical instance of emotion in English’, a word that is culturally untranslatable (para. 2). Psychologists Matsumoto and Juang (2016), on the other hand, critique so-called theories of linguistic relativity, which hold that language shapes our thought and worldview. Just because frustration has no exact equivalent in many languages, they argue, we cannot assume ‘that people of these cultures never feel frustrated’ (Matsumoto & Juang, 2016, p. 222).

Either way, frustration is on the rise. The Google Books Ngram Viewer, which indexes millions of books published in English, shows a sharp increase in published occurrences of frustration since the mid-1910s – a striking upswing when compared to similar words such as disappointment, usage of which has declined substantially since 1800, or deception, which has remained fairly stable (see Figure 4). We can only speculate as to the reasons behind this remarkable change in fortune. Has frustration become so prevalent due to the alienating effects of twentieth-century technology? The Freudian emphasis on the self? The development of modern consumer culture, with its inducements of desire and heightened expectations of reward?

Whatever its causes, the frustration experienced by so many academic writers today appears to be a distinctively modern condition, the product of a cultural environment that demands from us ever-increasing levels of productivity and perfection. Writing has become a mirror in which we come face to face with our own flaws, grotesquely distorted by the expectations of those who judge us. Only by averting our eyes can we stumble past with our self-confidence intact.
3.3. The slide (a descent into definitions and derivatives)

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the earliest known English use of frustration dates back to the fifteenth century, with the transitive verb to frustrate variously meaning ‘to balk, disappoint’ (a person or expectation), ‘to neutralise, counteract’ (an effort or effect), ‘to make null and void’ (a law or right), or ‘to baffle, defeat, foil’ (a design or purpose). Frustration, meanwhile, referred to ‘the action of frustrating’ (Oxford English Dictionary). Today, the noun frustration no longer signifies an action so much as a state of mind:

Frustration (n). The feeling of being annoyed or less confident because you cannot achieve what you want (Cambridge Dictionary)

Frustration (n). A deep chronic sense or state of insecurity and dissatisfaction arising from unresolved problems or unfulfilled needs (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

The verb frustrate, however, still retains a sense of external agency, suggesting an impediment imposed upon us by someone or something other than ourselves:

Frustrate (v). Prevent (a plan or attempted action) from progressing, succeeding, or being fulfilled; prevent (someone) from doing or achieving something (English Oxford Living Dictionary)

Frustrate (v). [Legal] To make a contract impossible to fulfil (Macmillan Dictionary, paraphrased)

The adjective frustrated, likewise, invokes the past participle of that transitive verb: the residue of a past action of which we are the passive recipient.

Thus, in the most common phrasings of frustration in English – this is frustrating, I feel frustrated – we portray ourselves as helpless objects, acted upon by some anonymous force. Frustration happens to us; we seem to have little control over it. But if language hides our frustrators, it is also capable of exposing them. Whenever we encounter frustration as an internalised feeling, we can drag it out of the shadows and turn it around syntactically, denouncing our feeling of impotence for what it actually is: a situation imposed on us by ‘frustrators’ that we can externalise and thereby vanquish. It’s so frustrating when

Figure 4. Relative percentages of the words frustration, disappointment and deception in books published in English each year between 1800 and 2000. Graph generated courtesy of Google Books Ngram Viewer (http://books.google.com/ngrams).
I can’t find the right words,’ we sigh. This is the frustrator as playground bully (‘Give it to me RIGHT NOW!’) or smothering stage parent (‘Come on darling, we all know how talented you are, just perform!’). ‘My writing is frustratingly slow,’ we lament: here, the frustrator is a horseback rider impatiently cracking a whip. ‘Wait,’ we can reply to our mental bullies. ‘Leave me alone. I need some time to think.’

4. Metaphors of frustration

And so we arrive at our fourth section of the maze: the shape-shifting realm of metaphor. When we asked a group of colleagues at a writing retreat to come up with metaphors that describe their frustration as writers, their words (paradoxically?) flowed freely. Frustration, they told us, resembles a physical blockage, like constipation or being unable to sneeze. Frustration is an impassable obstacle, like coming to the edge of a cliff. Frustration is an expenditure of energy that gets you nowhere, like running in a hamster wheel. Frustration is a self-imposed hindrance, like painting yourself into a corner. Frustration is a road paved with broken glass: ‘Whichever way you go, it’s going to be painful’. Frustration is performance anxiety, like getting on stage and forgetting your lines. Frustration is a heaviness, like being weighted down by stones. Frustration is slow progress, like a snail inching its way across a playground. Frustration is fear, like a dream of having your teeth fall out. Frustration is the distance between you and your destination, like a light at the end of the tunnel that never seems to get any closer. Frustration is an exercise in futility, like playing an endless game of Snakes and Ladders or winning a pie-eating contest in which the prize is more pie. Frustration is the panic you feel when you are in an impenetrable wilderness and find out that even your guide is lost.

In nearly all of these metaphors, frustration is figured as an almost overwhelming sense of disempowerment or obstruction: can’t breathe, can’t sneeze, can’t pass, can’t climb, can’t start, can’t finish, can’t leave, can’t arrive, can’t perform, can’t escape, can’t win, can’t fail, can’t get out of there safely. In an effort to find our own way past these disabling metaphors, we asked a colleague, poet-scholar Selina Tusitala-Marsh, to assign us some creative writing exercises designed to spin us out of the hamster wheel and helicopter us over broken glass. Each of us chose a different compositional task. Helen opted for an exercise called ‘My Life as a Projector’, telling the story of frustration through an object:

my teacup charts a dreamscape
of tropical islands and volcanoes
blue kingfisher singing from a tree
amber tea gone cold

Evija wrote down 10 things she had seen in the last 24 hours, linking them together in a poem about frustration:

a river of rain running down a street
pretending it knows where it’s going
a dehumidifier busily hissing
pretending it can make things dry
And Madeleine wrote a poem in the form of a letter to an old flame; what started out as a love poem developed into a manifesto instead, an empowering declaration of independence from the fetters of her own authorial insecurities (see Figure 5).

Metaphor transforms frustration from our enemy into our guide. By recasting frustration as a person, place or thing – a domineering ex-lover, an inaccessible dreamscape, a hissing dehumidifier – we can speak to it, inhabit it, fix it. Alternatively, we can look for metaphors based not on nouns but on active verbs. For example, a group of Danish PhD students likened writing in English to walking in high heels, riding a bicycle in a pedestrian street or having a bad hair day, while doctoral students at writing workshops in the United Kingdom and Australia compared writing a literature review to eating a live elephant or ‘persuading an octopus into a jar’ (Cozart et al., 2015, p. 305; Kamler & Thomson, 2014, p. 36). Verb-based metaphors emphasise effort rather than failure, highlighting their authors’ anxieties in the face of a difficult-but-not-impossible challenge. Riding a bicycle on a pedestrian street may be slow, but you will get to your destination eventually. Bad hair days are often followed by good hair days. Persuading an octopus into a jar becomes a feasible task if you can assemble the right tools to help you: a syringe of anaesthetic, perhaps, to stop the octopus from squirming, or a jar with a very wide mouth, or a colleague with experience in octopus-whispering.

Three months after our writing retreat, we brought together our original group of colleagues and asked them to ‘re-story’ their metaphors of frustration into redemptive tales of effort and accomplishment. Some found ways of conquering frustration by enlisting other people to help them:

If you’re afraid of forgetting your lines, you can make sure there’s a prompter in the wings of the theatre.

Sometimes when I feel that I’m sinking in a swamp, all it takes to save me is a lifeline thrown by a friend or colleague.

Some invoked metaphors of patience:

When you’re being swept out to sea by a riptide, there’s no point fighting it; you just need to stay afloat and swim sideways until you’re free of the current.

It’s like those Biblical stories of walking through a dark place but knowing you’ll survive: transformation requires faith.

Some called on magical thinking:

In fairy tales, if you find yourself trapped underwater, you’ll sprout gills and turn into a fish or a mermaid.

When you come to the edge of the cliff, just fly!

What all of these solutions have in common is a shift of attitude: what one colleague called ‘crossing the bridge from the can’t to the can’. Metaphor, as this exercise reminded us, can become a tool not just for describing frustration but for refashioning it, rerouting it and finding a way beyond it.
To my darling Frustration

I hate to say it, but I always knew
you were not The One. So unknowable, you were!
So two-faced; such a politician.
One minute, you’d be egging me on
with nuclear-force enthusiasm. You can do it!
You’d say; you deserve it, go get it!
Then, in the mere flush of a toilet,
you’d turn, change, sneer. You could make
me feel no better than a dung beetle.
I’d have to go and lie down, alone, in a dark room,
and even then, you wouldn’t leave;
taunted me through the door.
I tried to develop an exoskeleton,
some kind of hard defence against you,
but I loved you too. You were so familiar.
It was hard to leave.
You knew me most intimately of everyone:
all my insecurities and fault lines;
the oceanography of my fear.
We fought that day in my office.
You held yourself proud as a pompadour
while I stated my reasons,
and you wouldn’t shake hands.
Never mind – I’ve met someone else now. His name
is Perseverance.
I hope you’re happy, even though I wouldn’t
wish you on anyone else.
We are never, ever getting back together.

Figure 5. Madeleine’s frustration poem. The assignment called for her to write a love letter to an old flame, incorporating at least some of the following unsentimental words: dung beetle, politician, nuclear, exoskeleton, oceanography, pompadour, toilet. Madeleine rose to the challenge and used them all.
5. From frustration to amazement

In Greek mythology, the Minotaur is a fearsome creature, half-human and half-bull, to whom young Athenian men and women are periodically sacrificed by the Cretan King Minos. Released into the Minotaur’s maze, they wander about in confusion, like early-career academics offered up to the greedy appetites of the modern neoliberal university. Eventually, the hero Theseus enters the maze to set things right. With the help of a sword and a ball of yarn secretly gifted to him by Minos’ daughter Ariadne, he kills the Minotaur and leads his compatriots to safety by following the unrolled clew of thread (the origin of our modern word clue) back to the entrance.

Frustrated academic writers may be tempted to identify themselves not with the sacrificed Athenians but with Theseus (the hero who eventually slays the monster), or at least with Ariadne (the faithful lover who enables Theseus’ heroic deed). However, it is worth recalling that the Minotaur of Greek mythology was not an alien creature but Ariadne’s half-brother, born of the same human mother. Academic frustration, likewise, is best understood not as an evil Other but as our own kin, a creature whose bloodlines we share. When we acknowledge frustration as a familiar/familial companion on our academic journey, its lair becomes less disorienting, its monstrous mien less terrifying.

Throughout this paper, we have intentionally used the word maze rather than labyrinth to describe the twisting, disorienting spaces of academic frustration. A labyrinth is a relatively simple construction, its single path winding from the starting point to the centre and back again (see Figure 6). Knowles and Grant (2014) have likened the contemplative experience of walking a labyrinth to the ‘holding embrace’ of an academic writing retreat, where a nurturing environment and supportive colleagues move us step by step through the various stages of the writing process, secure in the knowledge that we will eventually arrive at our destination. The writing-as-labyrinth metaphor promises blocked writers a way forward, inviting us to reimagine scholarly endeavour as a venue for meditation, self-reflection and change.

The writing-as-maze metaphor, by contrast, offers a considerably more ambivalent view of the academic writer’s journey. Unlike a labyrinth, with its serenely unicursal

Figure 6. A unicursal labyrinth. Image drawn by Evija Trofimova.
path, the Minotaur’s maze is a multicursal structure that incorporates false leads, wrong turns and dead ends. In our visual representation of this article (Figure 1), we have placed our Minotaur squarely at the centre; but we might equally well have drawn a centreless maze where monsters lurk around every corner and where hidden trapdoors and wormholes can transport the unwary into other dimensions without warning. Indeed, we faced our own share of such perils while writing this paper: shifty sentences and protean paragraphs that refused to be coaxed into shape; reviewers and editors (not from this journal, thankfully) who wanted us to flatten our maze into a conventional academic article with Methods, Results and Analysis sections all clearly laid out in a linear flow. Crucially, none of us had to confront these frustrations alone. Our collaborative experience of navigating the maze together emboldened us to keep pushing forward and taught us the intellectual value of conversations that dwell in complexity rather than seeking an easy way out. When we approach the Minotaur’s abode in a spirit of playfulness and pleasure – submitting to its mysteries and marveling at the elegance of its forking paths – the frustration-haunted terrain of academic writing becomes a place not of entrapment but amazement.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**References**


