Understanding the frustration of academic writers

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*Have you ever found yourself unable to complete a piece of writing because something else got in the way: a more urgent commitment, a lack of crucial information, an inability to find the right words? If yes, then you are probably well acquainted with frustration, an emotion commonly felt by academic writers but seldom explicitly discussed or examined. When **Helen Sword**, **Evija Trofimova** and **Madeleine Ballard** first set out to write a scholarly article on the topic, they found themselves, well, frustrated. Their experience of writing about writing-related frustration helped them develop strategies for moving beyond it.*

In a recent survey of 1,223 academic writers from across the disciplines and around the world, *frustration* emerged as the most frequently mentioned writing-related emotion, cited nearly twice as often as the next two emotions on the list, *anxiety* and *satisfaction*. As academic writers with a particular research interest in academic writing, we wanted to understand more about writing-related frustration: what it is, where it comes from, and why it plagues so many of us. But how could we even begin to approach such a mercurial and multifaceted topic? We could find very little published research on academic frustration and even less that focused specifically on frustration in writing. Where should we start? Where did we want to go?
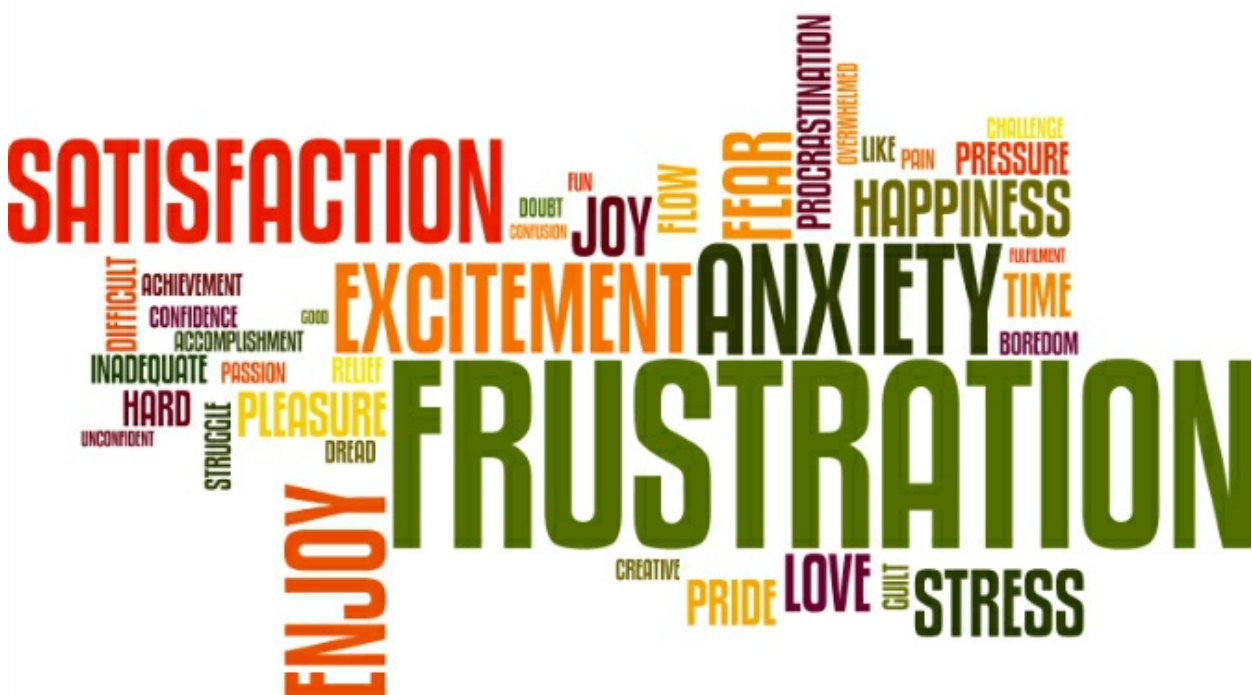
Figure 1: Top 40 emotion words listed by academic writers; word size is

proportionate to frequency (n=1223).

Eventually we let go of our ambition to fully understand frustration or to present a set of neatly-packaged findings in a conventional journal article. Instead, we decided to write a creative/critical/collaborative essay about frustrated academic writers, using the task itself as a journey of discovery. After many false starts, we eventually hit upon the idea of structuring our article as a multiple-entry maze, with each new threshold leading to and through a different aspect of writing-related frustration.
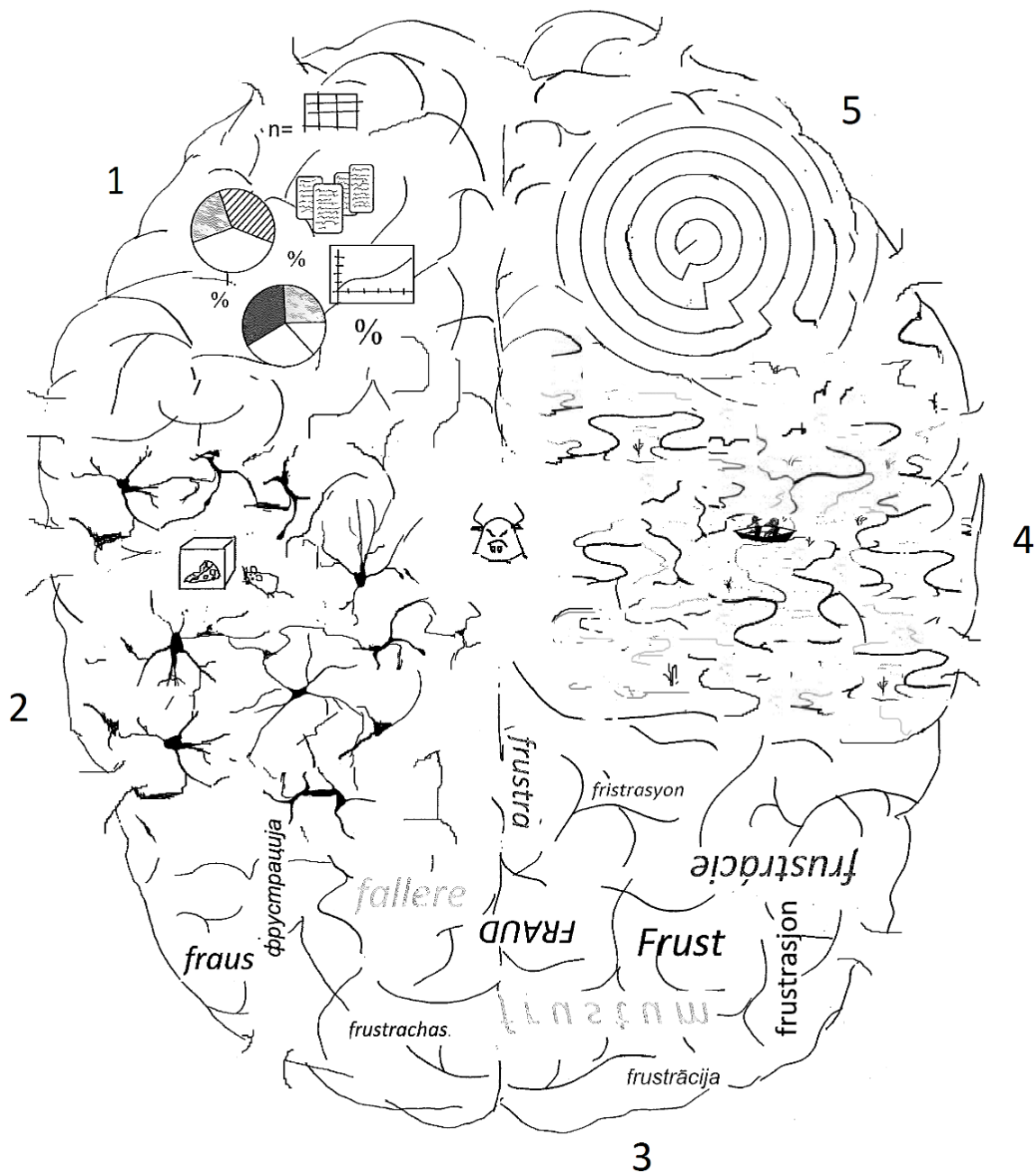

Figure 2: Our article visualised as a brain/map/maze with five different sets of entry and exit points and a Minotaur at the centre. Drawing by Evija Trofimova.

Madeleine

My task was to take a closer look at our dataset of 1,223 questionnaires and see what they could tell me about the root causes of the respondents' frustrations. As I read through each instance of the word *frustration* (plus sibling terms like *frustrating* and *frustrated*), I discovered two things. First, the respondents tended to use the word as a "cover-all" term: when they wrote *frustration*, they often really meant *anger* or *disappointment* or *despair*. Second, they named a startling array of causes for their frustration, from time pressure to feelings of inadequacy and ineloquence. As I confronted all this variety, I realised that frustration's nebulous quality actually serves as a smokescreen for its universality. Frustrated writers may *feel* alone in their suffering, but frustration is actually common, with common causes: a widespread malady brought on by the pressures, challenges, and isolation of the modern academic environment. This insight enabled me to forge some frustration-fighting techniques: acknowledging the commonness of the problem; taking comfort in the fact that scores of academics have overcome frustration before; and, most importantly, *talking* about and sharing my own writing-related frustrations. As I discovered while writing my section, frustration becomes much less frustrating once its isolating power has been stripped away.

Evija

None of us has a background in psychology, so I was asked to review the scientific literature on cognitive psychology and neuropsychology. I approached the task with great humility and, from the start, felt lost. Much of the research on behavioural and psychological patterns was beyond my grasp in its volume and complexity. Some of the most compelling studies were performed in laboratories on animals, from whom, it turns out, we can learn a lot. Frustration is related to reward expectancy and originates in the seeking system of the brain's dopamine circuit, a basic neuroaffective network in mammals, humans included. Reading about experiments with fox squirrels, I learned the value of primeval frustration-induced anger in overcoming obstacles. Even though the unique cognitive capacities of the human brain mean that we are the only animals capable of triggering negative emotions by responding to pure thought scenarios, we are also the only animals that can consciously employ strategies to reduce frustration. My readings in the psychology literature helped me to better recognise the stimuli that trigger (and ease) my own frustrations as a writer. My growing awareness of the physiological, psychological, and neurological complexities of frustration, while leaving me in awe and still feeling somewhat lost, also helped me accept frustration as a normal human experience.

Helen, Evija, Madeleine

The broad topic of "frustration in language" made up the longest and most labyrinthine section of our maze. We wanted to explore various aspects of the word *frustration* – its etymology, its cognates in other languages, its semantic implications, its changing usage over time – but feared getting bogged down or losing our way. Our solution was to take a playfully collaborative approach, conceiving of this section as a maze-within-the-maze: a carnival funhouse featuring distorting mirrors and shifting floors. For the segment on etymology, for example, we conducted an online conversation via Google Docs, responding in real time to each other's written comments. For the segment on historical shifts in usage, we generated a graph showing the relative frequencies of *frustration* and other

common emotion words in books published in English since 1800. Sticking close together, taking turns to hold the torch that lit our path, we meandered, staggered, and stomped our way through each segment and eventually emerged out the other side, slightly dizzy but no longer quite as disoriented as before.

Figure 3: Relative percentages of the words *frustration*, *disappointment*, and *deception* in books published in English each year between 1800 and 2000. Graph generated by the Google Books Ngram Viewer.

Helen

For the penultimate section of the article, I decided to explore how metaphors for writing can help writers conquer frustration. I delved into the research literature on metaphor, analysed hundreds of writing-related metaphors and asked my friend and colleague Selina Tusitala Marsh, the current Poet Laureate of New Zealand, to assign us some poetry-writing exercises that might help us break through our own emotional blockages. (A highlight was Madeleine's poem "To my darling Frustration," addressed to Frustration in the guise of a former lover). By the time I finished drafting the section, I understood more clearly how our unconventional choice of structure had empowered us to write through our own frustrations about our topic. By conceptualising frustration's lair as a multicursal maze, we had granted ourselves permission to revel in its twists and turns rather than fearing the perils of its forking paths.

> **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 defense 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 4: Madeleine's frustration poem. The assignment called for her to write a love letter to an old flame using 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!

Helen, Evija, Madeleine

Having opened our article with the image of a maze inhabited by a shadowy Minotaur, we decided to end it with a brief discursus into myth. Like the Minotaur of Greek mythology, born of a human mother, academic frustration is a monster of our own making, a half-sibling whose bloodlines we share. We met with our own share of human-spawned frustrations while writing our paper: protean sentences that refused to be coaxed into shape; elusive concepts that kept ducking around the next corner; reviewers and editors 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 reminded us of the intellectual value of conversations that dwell in complexity rather than seeking an easy way out.

This blog post is based on the authors' article, "Frustrated academic writers", published in Higher Education Research & Development (DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2018.1441811).

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About the authors

Helen Sword is Professor and Director of the Centre for Learning and Research in Higher Education at the University of Auckland and the author of five books on writers and writing, including, most recently, Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academic Write (2017). Her workshops and presentations on "stylish academic writing" have taken her to more than 60 colleges, universities and research institutes in 17 countries. See her website for links to her books, articles, and two online feedback tools: the Writer's Diet (for trimming and toning baggy prose) and the Writing BASE (for developing productive writing habits).

Evija Trofimova is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Centre for Learning and Research in Higher Education at the University of Auckland. She is interested in writing as both process and product and in the significance of the tools and spaces that writers use as they write. Evija tweets as @evijat and runs the Writing, Writing Everywhere website, an online resource for writers and teachers of writing. She is the author of Paul Auster's Writing Machine: A Thing to Write With (2014, 2016).

Madeleine Ballard graduated from the University of Auckland in 2017 with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in English and German and will commence Masters study later this year. Her research interests include twentieth-century literature, poetry, the literary essay genre, and the conventions and cultures of academic writing. She has worked as Helen's research assistant since 2016 and recently began writing collaboratively with Helen and Evija.