

How to plan your scientific writing around your hormones

By Ana Pineda, Phd

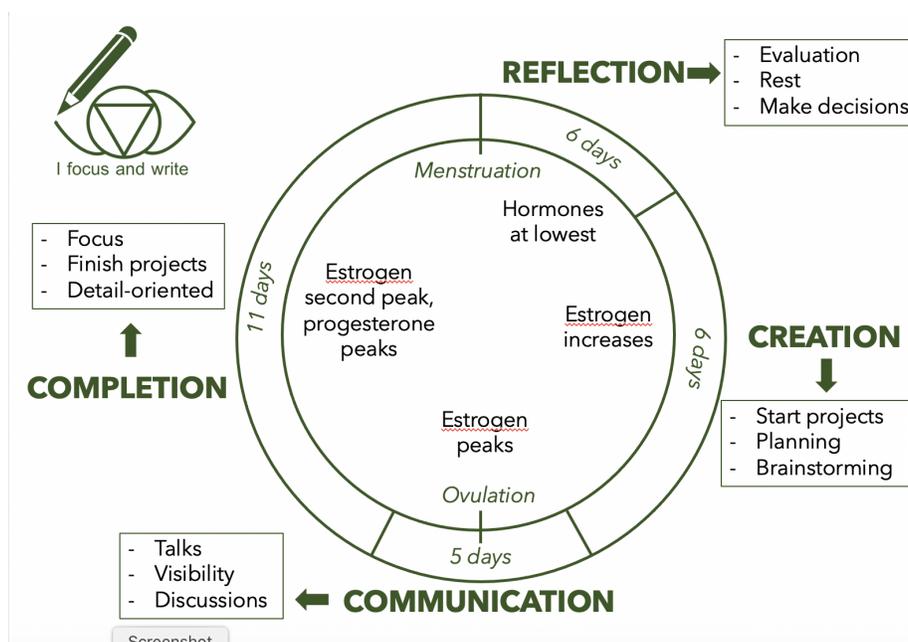
Article published in June 2020 as a blog post [here](#).

This is going to be the first post of a 2-part series dedicated to women, and especially, on how to plan our research and writing around two crucial aspects of a woman's life: our monthly menstrual cycle and the pregnancy and breastfeeding period. If you don't identify yourself as a woman, keep reading, because you can then share with women you love, or women you work with!

In this blog, you can read topics to improve your productivity, especially in the context of scientific writing. But one of my values is also creativity, which means that I love to propose ideas that may sound a bit crazy at first (but of course, are not). You may have noticed that some days the theory of time management works and you are the focus master. But other days, your brain does not want to focus and write, not even with the [Pomodoro technique of this post!](#)



If you are a menstruating woman and this sounds familiar, your fluctuating hormones and their effect on how your brain works may have something to do. In addition to the daily 24 h cycle everybody has, you have a 28-day cycle (more or less) that is mainly under the control of estrogen and progesterone. Before we continue, let me emphasize that women can still get anything done at any time, just some days certain tasks may take much more energy than others, and that's what I want to help with!



What blew my mind was to learn that you can plan your work following your own cycle to optimize the use of your physical and mental energy. I heard about this in one of my favorite business podcasts with the wonderful Kate Northrup (she also talks about it in her book "Do less"). But tracking your own cycle and plan accordingly is a strategy that is being implemented in different fields. For example, athletes are using this to optimize trainings and recovery periods, and the US football team attributes their World Cup to this strategy. Here I'll explain a general framework that you can implement into your scientific life and your writing, and you can grab my [free template](#) for that!

Writing a scientific paper and doing research is a creative process that can be divided into four phases. If you are a menstruating woman, they can match your monthly cycle. And if you are not, you may also identify these phases during your day, or yearly seasons if you track yourself. Now, let's have a look at those phases (days are indicative):

The REFLECTION phase

This phase starts the first day of the period, and here, the estrogen and progesterone are both at their minimum levels of the cycle. This is a tough period. In some cultures it is totally stigmatized. And in western cultures we got this phase wrong, pushing women to be as productive as any other moment. Either if you have a hard time during this phase or not, resting should be a priority. This is a period where you often can tune well inwards with what is not working in your (academic) life, so it's a good moment to reflect and reevaluate. A fascinating aspect is that "darker" periods are necessary and often precede creative ones. And that's exactly what we as women have every month!



The CREATION phase

This phase starts around 6 days after the cycle starts when estrogen levels start increasing. If the previous phase was tough for you, here you are going to feel

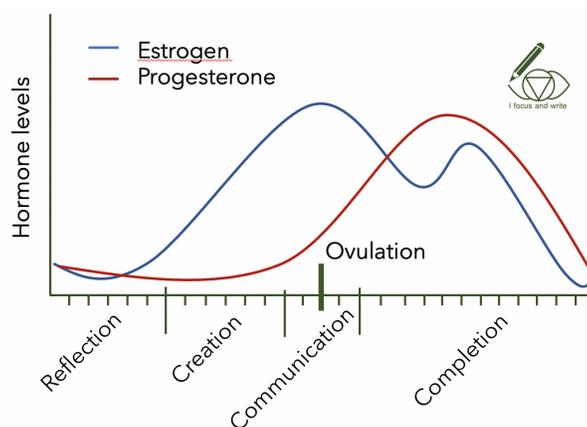
blooming! You will identify it because ideas will constantly pop-up and you'll be excited about them. So be sure you take notes, and then evaluate what is worth following up. This is a good moment to brainstorm, make plans, and start new projects. For more ideas about writing and to write your own cycle planning, [download here a free template!](#)

The **COMMUNICATION** phase

This phase lasts 5 days around the ovulation and is here where estrogen peaks at its maximum level. In this phase the brain activity related to verbal fluency increases, as well as your overall energy. That together with being more receptive to other people's ideas, makes it the perfect moment to communicate your work! For specific ideas, [get the freebie ;\)](#)

The **COMPLETION** phase

This phase lasts around 11 days, and estrogen starts decreasing with a second peak in the middle, together with a progesterone peak. This is a focus phase most of the time, although getting closer to the menstruation your hormone levels decrease and you may feel entering the reflection phase. This is the phase for focus work and finish projects.



The key is that you track your own cycle because the length, energy, and experiences can be unique. For that, I have prepared a template for you with some extra ideas around writing. And, why try? First, it is not going to cost you money nor time. But...it may improve your productivity! And more importantly, it can explain some ways you were feeling and that created all kinds of self-doubt and imposter syndrome feelings about your capabilities to write or to be a scientist. So, cyclical planning is one of the things I teach my students in the [Mindful Productivity course](#).

Now, by no means, I think you cannot finish your work, or deliver something of high quality if you don't follow your own cycles. But we have a big potential in our cycles that societies have ignored with shame around it. I will finish with a quote from the Ted talk of Lucy Peach "The power of the period": "You are gonna have around 500 of these cycles. So use them! If we can harness solar power, if we can harness wind power, it's time that we harness menstrual power".



Planning around your cycle

PDF sheet with ideas about writing in each of your four phases and space to adjust it to your own cycle.

[Send it to me!](#)