



1 Introduction: writing and editing academic texts

Academia uses theses, ... and articles as a way of testing your ability ... to use written communication effectively to convey your research findings, ideas and arguments. The examiner also checks your ability to use citations and bibliographic references correctly.

Professional Editors' Guild

As anyone who has ventured into academic discourse will attest to, getting to the point where an academic text can be submitted for examination or publication is no easy matter. As this quotation from a document on 'Copy-editing academic texts: Guidelines for students and authors' published by the Professional Editors' Guild (PEG 2022) makes clear, there is a great deal of detail to attend to. Writing academic texts demands that the tasks you must take account of and complete in the extended process of producing your thesis or article are diverse, detailed and multilayered. These tasks are not for the faint-hearted, but if they are approached in a thorough and methodical manner, the end-product is certainly achievable.

The demands of writing academic texts range from writing in a cogent and convincing manner to following the prescripts of academic writing discourse; from writing in an accessible manner following Plain Language principles to ensuring that the authorities you consulted are correctly cited to avoid accusations of plagiarism; from using verb tenses appropriately to getting your grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc correct; from dealing correctly and consistently with quoted matter to inserting and styling tables and figures correctly; from adopting a consistent referencing system to acknowledge your sources to creating a usable reference list or bibliography. Each of these topics has a chapter dedicated to it in this book.

However, as a member of an academic discourse community who employs English for Academic Purposes (EAP), you are not expected to

‘go it alone’: you are only one member of an academic troika: yourself, your supervisor and a professional copy-editor. As Schmied (2011: 20) has aptly expressed it:

A scientist can write a first draft but it takes a real language specialist to improve it according to the conventions of the discourse community.

Your supervisor should be your firm shoulder to lean on and your sage advisor on your topic and the way you present the sections or chapters of your text, supported correctly by references to your sources. And perhaps they could even advise you on your writing with a view to making it ‘cogent and convincing’. Consulting your peers in your discipline or subject area, or asking them to review your drafts, is also strongly recommended. But then a professional language specialist who focuses on improving academic texts should also become involved to help you polish your text to a level of impressiveness that will lead to the awarding of a degree or to its publication in a reputable journal. That specialist is known as a copy-editor (your words being known by their cohort as ‘copy’).

Whereas the copy-editor has free rein when you are preparing an article or a chapter in a book for publication, the ‘rules’ are much stricter when they engage with an examinable text (see chapter 21) – to the point that universities require them to write a declaration of the nature and extent of their engagement with your text. Essentially, and for sound ethical reasons, your original thinking and the words that express it must remain entirely yours, not the editor’s.

The writing process

Once you have completed your research study, the process of producing your thesis or articles for publication commences. It typically comprises these steps (not necessarily in this order), although step 10 should always be the last in the process – see chapter 3 for the reasons:

- 1 Gather, analyse and present your data or the contents of interviews. Your analysis and presentation could take the form of tables, graphs or charts of one kind or another that tell your story visually, in support of your text.

- 2 Write up a first draft of your introduction or background section, which should state the reason for and objectives of your research.
- 3 Complete your reading of the literature about your research and write up your literature review.
- 4 You will also need to have decided on the theoretical underpinning of your study, which you must describe for the benefit of your readers.
- 5 The next section describes the methodology (research design) and methods you implemented to arrive at your findings.
- 6 Then write up and discuss your results or findings – which will involve a fair amount of analysis, correct verb usage (especially for ‘hedging’ – see chapter 8) and the presentation of data in tabular or graph/chart format or as pertinent extracts from the transcripts of interviews. You must be sure that your commentary and the tabular or graphic content complement each other but do not repeat each other unnecessarily. The findings section could be combined with your discussion of them or the discussion could be a separate section inserted between the findings and the conclusions sections.
- 7 It is customary for a piece of academic writing to end with a conclusion section and possibly even some recommendations, if appropriate. Here, any limitations of your study should be mentioned. Write these only after you have completed the other sections, referring to the introduction as you do so to ensure compatibility between the two.
- 8 As you proceed with writing all the sections or chapters, all the references you consulted and cited in your text must be recorded in full and then listed in alphabetical order by surnames – either as one continuous group or separated into sections such as books, journals, online sources, theses, conference papers and reports.
- 9 Your first draft will then need to be reviewed objectively and critically to eliminate any errors of omission, repetition, wordiness, lack of coherence, lack of clarity or ambiguity, etc. Then you will have to edit the final version to polish it further and, finally, subject it to proofreading so as to detect and correct any remaining errors.
- 10 Finally, compose the abstract and your list of keywords and either write or refine your title, bearing in mind any limitations imposed

by whoever you are submitting the work to (eg the maximum word count for the title and abstract, the number of keywords).

That is the process you as an academic writer should follow methodically. But what of the writing itself? According to Aitchison and Lee (2006: 266), writing is central to research and the production and exchange of knowledge; Murray (2007: 7) adds that writing 'cannot be separated from learning and research'. Boyer (1990) states that academic writing for publication is a scholarly activity, and Murray and Moore (2006) note that an academic's career development is usually defined by what they have written. Ocholla (2006) adds that research is complete only once it has been disseminated and shared.

Moreover, the discipline within which writing takes place will exert a considerable influence on the practice of writing up research. It is worth noting, though, that scholarly and academic writing is a skill that is learned and not merely acquired (Naidoo & Tshivhase 2003: 226); to most researchers, scholarly discourse does not come naturally.

While these authors emphasise the importance of writing to research and for publication, Murray et al (2008) write that academics are often ill-prepared to do so. Heinrich et al (2004) also cite a lack of skills in scholarly writing as an obstacle to writing for publication: graduate students are often expected to write manuscripts worthy of publication without being taught how to achieve this goal. This is a particular challenge to scholars for whom English is their second or a foreign language, especially since the move has recently been away from a text-based perspective to writing towards reader-oriented research and writing in which writers set out their thoughts with their readers foremost in mind.

For this reason, Gevers et al (2006) recommend that there should be a greater focus in academia on training for writing for publication. They argue that an academic cannot be assumed to be properly trained if their original research results obtained during supervised study have not been published. Gordon (2005) proposes various approaches to developing writing skills. One of these is for prospective authors to attend workshops targeted at publication; and that such workshops should incorporate insights from the editors of academic journals and

require the participants to engage actively in writing practice, à la writing retreats or writing support groups (see chapter 3).

Consequently, in this book we begin by considering the writing process and the quality of writing as academic discourse intended for an identified community. We then move on to deal with the nitty-gritty of all the other elements listed above. These elements are those experienced and now shared by seasoned academic editors who have engaged with writing by researchers from around the world – all of whom have communicated their research in English. The focus in this book is not on the research process or the methodology itself: that is the subject of other specialist publications.

Academic writing: what it should be

But what, you may ask, is effective writing? In any genre or context, it is the ability to express yourself clearly, concisely and coherently in writing, in print or online. ‘There are no clear-cut, objective criteria for establishing a scale of effectiveness in writing for all purposes and occasions,’ writes McArthur (1992: 341), but two levels of competence are generally emphasised:

- (1) Ability with the basics of the written language: spelling, punctuation, grammar and word use.
- (2) Awareness of the right style and rhetoric for the occasion and one’s readership (1992: 341).

In the context of this book, ‘the right style and rhetoric’ are those that apply to formal academic writing or academic discourse. And our purpose with this textbook is to heighten your awareness of them, in addition to providing guidance on minutiae such as correct spelling, punctuation, grammar and word use. Fowler and Fowler, in *The King’s English: The essential guide to written English* (2003: 1), offer writers the following sound advice:

Be direct, simple, brief, vigorous, and lucid ... Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched. Prefer the concrete word to the abstract. Prefer the single word to the circumlocution. Prefer the short word to the long.

In essence, what these authors are proposing is Plain Language text (Cutts 2013; Moffett et al 2020: 24–25; see also chapter 10). Gowers, in the timeless publication that is relevant still to this day, *The complete plain words* (1987: 3), adds similarly helpful advice:

The golden rule is to pick those words that convey to the reader the meaning of the writer and to use them and them only. The golden rule applies to all prose, whatever its purpose.

Gowers adds (1987: 3–4):

You (the writer) need to choose the right words in order that you may make your meaning clear not only to your reader but also to yourself. The first requirement for all writers is to know just what meaning they want to convey, and it is only by clothing their thoughts in words that they can think at all.

This goes to the nub of academic discourse. When writing, this means adopting a reader-focused or -oriented perspective that enables you to engage effectively with your readers as you ‘clothe your thoughts in words’ (Hyland 2000: 194, cited in Schmied 2011: 1). Keep asking yourself: Will the average reader in my intended audience grasp my message or meaning at first reading or in my abstract, introduction and every paragraph of every section? If not, you need to rework, rephrase or reword them to attain that objective. In support of this, Gowers cites George Orwell (1947):

A scrupulous writer in every sentence he writes will ask himself ... ‘What am I trying to say? What words will express it?’ ... and he probably asks himself ‘Could I put it more shortly?’

Looking at writing from the perspective of the reader – which is what the accomplished academic writer should do – Strunk (2000: xvi) used a different metaphor, that of a swamp of verbiage:

The reader was in trouble most of the time, floundering in a swamp, and that it was the duty of anyone attempting to write English to drain this swamp quickly and get the reader up on dry ground, or at least to throw them a rope.

Sadly, many writers in this genre regard writing ‘a swamp of verbiage’ as the correct way to present information and their argumentation in order to sound competent and authoritative. But nothing could be further from the truth today. For the writer of academic texts, perhaps the ability to write effectively, as asserted by McArthur (1992: 341), is more closely associated with

the habit of reading widely and a capacity to respond to established writers in terms not only of their surface messages but also their styles, subtexts, and allusions.

These are, indeed, important requirements of writing up academic or scientific research, for which academic English or EAP is often employed. But what is ‘academic English’?

Academic English is ‘the register of English used by scholars and scientists; an elevated and often complex style associated with a concern for accuracy, objectivity and dispassionate comment’ (McArthur 1992: 8). It has come to be characterised by

- qualifying expressions (at least, may, probably, under such conditions, usually);
- parenthetical asides intended to support or modify statements (according to the data, apparently);
- passive constructions (It was found that, the data were analysed) and impersonal and ‘dry’ (ie non-dramatic or -emotional) speech or word usage (1992: 8).

Academic writing or discourse generally makes use of apparatus such as introductions, provisos, disclaimers, acknowledgements, notes, references and bibliographies; it is often regarded as rarefied and pedantic, intimidating and at odds with Plain English (Moffett et al 2020: 24–25). But not all academics accept the prevailing writing styles in research papers and other documents. As Işık Taş put it:

Academic texts, like other forms of writing, are no longer defined as static or monolithic artifacts. Lexico-grammatical, rhetorical and discursal features of academic writing change in time (2010: 121).

In fact, recently, there has been a growing trend for academic writing to move away from what Mermin has termed ‘tedious drudgery ... that has deprived scientists of some powerful tools for enhancing their clarity in communicating matters of great complexity’, leading to the best scientific prose sounding like ‘a non-human author addressing a mechanical reader’ (1990, cited in McArthur 1992: 8).

During this transformation to more accessible texts, academic writing in a range of scientific disciplines has begun to take on a more personal human style with the infusion of active-voice constructions, first-person pronouns (I, we, my, our), simpler sentences (only one subject and one verb) and vigorous verbs rather than passive nouns (to name but a few) into scholarly writing – whether for examination or for publication.

In fact, recent research in EAP and academic writing – Hyland (2005), Harwood (2005) and Işık Taş (2010) – has shown evidence of this shift towards more active, personalised writing by both postgraduate researchers and seasoned authors, especially in the use of first-person pronouns in scholarly writing. It would seem that, whereas experienced writers have adopted this more personalised style, novice researchers or recent graduates have felt safer adhering to the elements of less personal, passive, wordy and less accessible writing (Kapp & Albertyn 2008).

Moffett et al (2020: 29–30) offer some explanations for why authors either misunderstand or misuse academic discourse:

- They are misguided in their belief that using dense discourse that is difficult to understand is expected of them.
- They are intimidated into thinking that unless they ‘dress up’ their ideas using jargon and fancy words, their writing will not be taken seriously.
- In trying to impress, they seek to create the impression of being knowledgeable, possessing great expertise.
- Perhaps the worst possible reason they misuse academic discourse is that if their peers or role models speak or write in this way, or they have become accustomed to doing so, why update their thinking or practice?

Nothing could be further from the truth, especially when we consider the international discourse community who are the potential readers of our

published work. This is where the competent copy-editor should be able to guide the author towards a text that is more accessible to the identified readers. Their fresh pair of eyes, backed by experience and expertise, will help to reshape writing that is verbose and contains structural flaws and problems with word choice and usage into something that sounds more naturally that of an accomplished first-language speaker. And writing in which ideas and information are expressed clearly, coherently and directly, and grasped, at first reading.

The following factors that hinder writing for publication have been identified by prospective authors: the task is too difficult, a lack of time, they are not sure of a topic to write about, and they fear rejection (Hodges 2004: 6). The obstacles to achieving the objectives of publication also include the practice of peer review implicit in the process of writing for academic journals, delays, superficial and hostile reviews (Friedlander & Bessette 2003: 17), and a lack of skills in scholarly writing (Heinrich et al 2004: 145).

Boice (in Naidoo & Tshivhase 2003: 227) indicates that professional academic writing is a separate arena of expertise, although it is rarely taught as part of postgraduate studies. For this reason, McGrail et al (2006: 25) recommend providing support during the process of writing for publication and indicate that a regular, ongoing arrangement seems to be the most beneficial.

The common errors committed by prospective academic authors have been identified in the following areas: research methodology, presentation/organisation, readability/language, literature review, referencing and originality (Ocholla 2006: 8). Of these, presentation/organisation, readability/language, literature review and referencing are dealt with in detail in this book. Diezmann (2005: 444) conducted research on errors in thesis writing and stated that they could either be 'mechanical' in general writing (eg spelling, punctuation) and scholarly writing (unsubstantiated claims) or errors in the microstructure of writing related to the flow of arguments and inconsistencies (ie coherence and consistency), and, finally, errors in the macro structure of writing regarding the quality and the clarity of purpose.

Common errors reported by the sample of journal editors in an editor survey conducted by Kapp, Albertyn and Frick (2011) indicated that

style and language were the errors with the highest frequency, followed by problems with referencing style. This is the experience of the authors of this book: very often, the problems with style and language arise from the author having to write in English, which could be their second, third or even a foreign language. In addition, writers of English as a foreign language are often unaware of or confused by the differences between US and UK/SA English, which can lead to a number of stylistic inconsistencies usually as a result of citations, paraphrasing or summarising their sources. For this reason, chapters in this book are dedicated to style and language problems, those aspects not directly related to the academic content of an article and which pertain to what Diezmann (2005: 444) calls ‘mechanical writing’. In their study, Kapp et al’s (2011) cohort of journal editors also identified a lack of focus on the topic in hand or on the objective of a study as being a common error.

Language editors’ contribution: a case study

In the participants’ feedback on the academic writing workshops that Kapp, Albertyn and Frick (2011) reported on, the value of the language editors’ contribution to the quality of the participants’ articles was viewed in a very positive light. One participant wrote: ‘I felt that this was a very important part of the workshop. Language editors are irreplaceable in the process of publication writing.’ In addition, appreciation was shown for the constructive nature of the editors’ feedback and the professional way in which it was given.

The participants also found the process itself constructive and felt that they had learned tips for improving their writing style. They felt, too, that this aspect has a long-term benefit: ‘[I have] learned to be concise and to the point with the essentials; the tips were helpful, which I still apply in my daily work.’ The language ability of the participants in the workshops varied widely, with the majority being second language English speakers. The editors’ input given in the workshop was experienced mainly in a positive light, with only a few respondents (first language English speakers) mentioning that they felt it was less helpful. One of these participants noted: ‘I did learn a few tips here and there (either things I’d forgotten and needed reminding

of or hints on format, etc).’ The same respondent added: ‘However, the editing on my article which I received was prompt, efficient and very helpful (both during and after the workshop) and again gave me the confidence to submit the article for publication.’ This is precisely how it should be experienced by writers of academic texts who submit them to professional copy-editors for polishing.

A shifting socio-political process

Academic writing is not merely a linguistic process, though. It is also a ‘socio-political process’ (Casanave 2003: 87) in which writers claim power in the discourse communities to which they belong, based on their discipline (Schmied 2011: 4). Authors seek acknowledgement and recognition in the social community they write for – for instance, conference papers and academic journals (Schmied 2011: 3–5). To this end, they employ different strategies to manifest their authorial identity. As pointed out by Casanave (2003: 90), compared to previous years, in recent years, research in writing has become more focused on how the cognitive, expressive and linguistic aspects of writing processes are embedded in social and political contexts of writing, and how all these aspects of writing interact to get writing accomplished.

Academic texts, like other forms of writing, are no longer defined as static or monolithic artefacts: the lexico–grammatical, rhetorical and discursal features of academic discourse change over time and between disciplines (Schmied 2011: 1). Moreover, genres form intertextual relationships with each other. Swales (2004) emphasises the shift in the definition of genre from a static towards a dynamic entity by introducing the concept of ‘genre networks’. Describing genres using the metaphor of a network, Swales (2004) reflects his observation that genres in the research world are frequently transformed into other genres. He points out, for instance, that published articles can both precede and follow theses and, further, that articles can even be combined into theses (2004: 22).

Moreover, current definitions of competency in academic writing are not based solely on linguistic ability but also on awareness of the rhetorical features of writing accepted by the discourse community.

Tardy (2005: 325) defines academic writing as the ‘transformation of knowledge’, which involves persuading readers of the work’s value, significance and credibility. Hyland (2005: 192) calls the academic writing process ‘an act of identity’ since it not only conveys disciplinary content but also carries a representation of the writer. Casanave (2003: 88), on the other hand, defines academic writing as a ‘socio-political process’ that takes place in a social context where writers and their writings are compared to other writers and their writings, and where institutional norms, instructor and gatekeeper criteria, feedback and the decisions of powerful evaluators help to determine what ‘success’ means.

Authorial identity might be manifested through various linguistic markers in academic writing, such as the use of first-person pronouns and meta-discourse (ie the discussion about a discussion, not about a topic). First-person pronouns play a crucial role in the way writers communicate with their audiences and construct their authorial identity. In this respect, Hyland (2005) comments that the decision either to adopt an impersonal rhetorical style or to represent oneself explicitly might influence the impression writers make on readers and might have significant consequences for the way in which their message is received. Hyland described the trend as follows:

describing the stages which help writers to set out their thoughts in ways readers can easily follow and identifying salient features of texts which allow them to engage effectively with their readers (Hyland 2005: 194, in Schmied 2011: 1).

It is undeniable that the back-breaking work that goes into producing that academic article, chapter or thesis will always be the responsibility of the researcher-author as they work through the ten steps outlined earlier in this chapter. This work must necessarily include the originator editing and proofreading their text before handing it over to a professional for copy-editing. In contrast, the task of the copy-editor late in the process is to impose a veneer of (near-)perfection on the document so that it not only conveys the author’s purpose and the details of their research clearly and accessibly but is also as impressive as it is engaging. This constructive author–editor collaboration should ultimately lead to that journal article being impressive enough to be accepted at submission or that

thesis setting out to impress the examiners as a model of communication which contributes to their being sufficiently convinced of the validity and veracity of the research to award the student their degree. Those are the ultimate goals that both author and copy-editor should jointly not only be aspiring to but also achieving.

Suggestions for approaching both these ultimate goals are provided in this textbook – in particular the nature and extent of the copy-editor's role in editing publishable and examinable texts. These chapters perhaps best exemplify one of the aims of this publication: to inform both authors and copy-editors about the nature of the enterprise that is academic discourse and its peculiar characteristics and elements in the finest detail. It also sets out to help each of these collaborators to understand both their and the other's role in the process. For this reason, this book is divided broadly into chapters that cover the writing process itself, those which are concerned with the nitty-gritties or mechanical aspects of writing and assembling articles and chapters and, finally, those that describe the copy-editor's contributions to the process. And, as a bonus, perhaps those academics new to playing the role of supervisor will also be able to gain from the insights that emerge from the research and writing that underpin this publication.