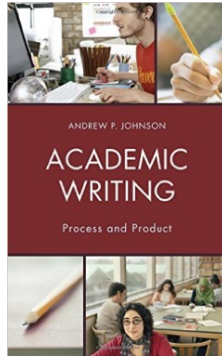


THE PROCESS USED FOR ACADEMIC WRITING

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Academic writing is easy as long as you understand and trust the process. This chapter starts with an overview of academic writing. It ends with a description of the super-secret process used for academic writing.

Big Picture

Academic writing is different in form and function than creative writing. The purpose of academic writing is to move ideas and information from point A (your head) to point B (your readers' heads) as efficiently and economically as possible. Like technical writing and most forms of writing used in professional settings, its basic purpose is to present information. Academic writing is used to write academic reports, inquiries, and essays in academic settings. A variation of this form is also valued in most business and professional settings.

Creative writing is used to tell a story or to evoke an emotional or aesthetic response. Its purpose is to entertain or inspire. Here the writer is able to inject his or her insights and emotion all over the page and to use words and language like colors on a pallet to paint a picture. Academic writing is more formal, uses structure to carry ideas, seldom contains dialogue, and is purposefully objective. Good academic writers take themselves out of the paper to the greatest extent possible and let the ideas and data carry their paper. Note the differences below.

Not academic writing. As I walked into the gymnasium I couldn't believe my eyes. The gym was packed with wild and crazy students all shouting their lungs out, cheering on their beloved basketball team. The team seemed to absorb their energy and was playing grit and determination, giving everything they had to beat the visiting foe from Shelbyville.

Academic writing. The home basketball team played Shelbyville in front of a large crowd of enthusiastic fans.

Types of Writing

There are three basic types of writing used in most academic and professional settings. Each of these will be described in more detail in the upcoming chapters.

- **Expository writing.** The purpose of this type of writing is to explain, describe, or to provide information in order to communicate knowledge.
- **Persuasive writing.** The purpose of this type of writing is to make a case for or against an issue using concise, objective language and sound reasoning.
- **Inquiry writing.** Inquiry is the process of asking a question, gathering data, and then using that data to answer the question. Data can be gathered using primary sources through direct observation, survey, interviews or other means; or data can be collected using secondary sources such as peer-reviewed research, scholarly articles and books. The purpose of this type of writing is to describe all phases of the inquiry process.

The Super-Secret Writing Process for Academic Writing

Academic writing is not an event that occurs in one setting but a process that occurs over time. And this process is necessarily messy. All writers think, plan, struggle, revise, re-write, and mess about in order to discover exactly what they want to say and how they want to say it. This is all part of the process (see Figure 1.1). Each step of this process is revealed below.

Figure 1.1. An overview of the super-secret writing process.

1. **Research to gather data.** Usually this means reading and taking careful notes. However, data can also be collected other ways.
2. **Pre-writing.** As the name implies, this is what is done before writing. This involves things such as planning, creating outlines, generating ideas, or finding structure.
3. **First-draft.** This is the first attempt to get ideas on the page.
4. **Revise.** This is the heart of the writing process. Here the writer re-reads, reshapes, gets feedback, and revises many times.
5. **Editing.** Editing should occur only after a piece has been revised several times. Here the writer looks for spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors.
6. **Share.** This is the very last step. This is where the paper is sent out into the world.

Step 1: Research to Gather Data.

You cannot write unless you have something to write about. Thus, the first step is to research to gather data. This is usually done by reading and taking careful notes. However, data can also be collected through interviews, observations, inquiries, or surveys. This provides the information necessary to write. Skipping or minimizing effort here makes writing much more difficult in all subsequent phases. Whether you are doing expository writing, persuasive writing, or inquiry, having a cohesive body of information in front of you makes the process of writing much easier and greatly enhances the quality of your final product.

Step 2: Pre-Writing

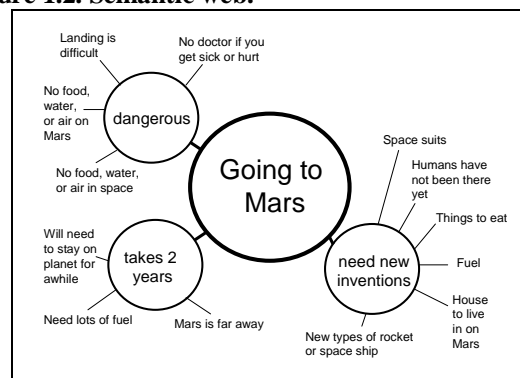
Once you have gathered data and taken notes, the next step is to generate ideas and find a basic yet flexible initial structure. Below are described five strategies for this. Note that there is no single strategy that is best for every person or every writing situation. Find the one that works best for you. Adopt and adapt.

- **Brainstorm and list.** Use a yellow legal pad or sheet of note paper and start listing ideas as quickly as you can. After you have a paper filled with scratches and messy sentences, then look for patterns and groups. Use these to create a very flexible, beginning and then begin to outline.

• **Brainstorm and group.** Start with your writing topic. Then generate as many ideas as quickly as you can related to your topic without regard to evaluation. That is, whenever you brainstorm you should include the silly, far-fetched ideas along with the more pragmatic ones. These ideas that may be consider conceptual outliers serve to stretch the boundaries of your thinking enabling you to think more broadly. Next, look for groups or patterns. Then organize the ideas into groups to create sections and paragraphs.

• **Semantic webs.** The semantic web allows you to generate ideas at the same time as you create structure. It tends to create a more visual structure. First, draw a circle in the middle of your paper and write your topic in the circle. Then, think of three or four ideas related to your topic. Each of these will become a node (see Figure 1.2). Next, list as many ideas as you can related to each node. Finally, use this flexible structure to begin writing. Each node of your web will become sections or paragraphs.

Figure 1.2. Semantic web.



• **Talking.** Talking through your writing project or explaining it to a friend or colleague helps to organize the ideas in your head and detect any missing parts. Encourage friends and colleagues to ask questions or add ideas.

• **Power writing.** Power writing helps you get in touch with your unconscious. Starting with your writing topic, write as many things as quickly as you can for one to three minutes. Do not overly think here. The goal is to create an abundance of ideas, both good and bad. Do not let your pen stop moving. Use free association to catch the first thing that pops into your mind. Let your mind travel. It does not matter if you jump from one idea to the next or if your ideas are jumbled. You will get it straightened out later.

Step 3: First Draft - Sloppy Copy

The first draft is your initial attempt to get ideas on paper. The first draft becomes an external version of your working memory used to hold all your thoughts and ideas as you generate and organize them and look for associations and supporting ideas. The first draft should be a poorly written, unorganized pile of garbage. Only then can you start to pull things away and begin to see some of the good ideas emerging. You have to throw that first blob of clay on the potter's wheel before you begin shaping it.

Andy aside. You cannot create good writing if you are not first willing to create bad writing. The first draft of this chapter was horrible. Things were all higgily-piggily on the page. There were far too many words, many of which made no sense at all. But having all the ideas on the page enabled me to see which were the good ones and which were the bad ones. And as I started pulling out the bad ideas I began to see a new structure emerging. I began to get a better sense of how one thing related to another. I could see which ideas need more explaining.

You must get your initial ideas on the page without evaluating them. Strive for quantity vs. quality at this stage. Celebrate really bad writing. It is the first step toward really good writing.

Step 4: Revision

Revision (re-vision) means to see again or in this case, see again and again and again. Revision is at the heart of the super-secret writing process. The first draft is like a potter throwing the first glob of clay on the wheel. Revision is where the potter begins to shape the clay. A potter would not spin the wheel once or twice and consider the pot to be finished. There is always a great deal of shaping and reshaping. New clay is added and taken away. The same applies to academic writing. Expect to revise a minimum of four times, but usually ten to fifteen times. Do not worry about spelling and punctuation here; rather, try to find a logical organization and listen to see if your sentences and paragraphs make sense.

Step 5: Editing

Editing is the fifth step. Here, you run your writing through a spell check program and concentrate on correct grammar, punctuation, word usage, and citations. It is also helpful at this stage to have others read your work and in order to provide feedback. This will give you a sense of how the ideas are playing inside the readers' head. This feedback also enables you to identify those parts of your paper that may be unclear or confusing. This may bring you back to an earlier step. The super-secret writing process is recursive. Very rarely will you move through the steps in a nice, orderly linear fashion. Most often you will need to repeat steps several times.

Step 6: Sharing or Publishing

The last step is to share your writing with the world.

How to Avoid Writers' Block

Sometimes when attempting to write the words and ideas just do not come out. And the harder you try, the fewer words and ideas appear on the page. This is commonly known as writers' block. This usually means that you are trying to get it just right the first time. You are trying to edit and generate ideas at the same time.

Writing involves two opposite mental operations: Generating and evaluating. You need to generate in order to get an abundance of words and ideas, but you also need to evaluate in order to throw out words and reshape the ideas you have generated. But you cannot do both of these operations at the same time. You cannot generate and evaluate simultaneously and expect to create anything but warm mush. The reason for this has to do with the way our brains work. While our long term memory (LTM) can hold a great deal of information for an almost infinite duration, our short term memory (STM) or working memory can hold only about seven chunks of information for approximately 15 seconds. This is not much room for a great deal of information. If you try to edit and organize your ideas at the same time as you are generating ideas, STM becomes overloaded and many of the ideas seem to slip away or become scattered.

One of the best cures for writers' block is to use a pencil and a legal pad and write as quickly and as badly as possible (see power writing above). This technique allows you to bypass the little editor in your head so that you can get your initial ideas on paper. As described above, editing is the last step in the writing process.

Final Word

Academic writing is easy; however, this does not mean that it is quick.

Mini-Lectures Related to Academic Writing

Overview of Academic Writing

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vq_QW3WZZ4

Objective and Subjective Writing: Part 1

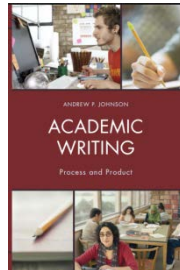
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wggrIEs8g0>

Objective and Subjective Writing: Part 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGc5alecYeQ>

Headings and Subheadings

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgG4n3Dbao>



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