

Academic Writing Support: Building an Effective Writing Routine

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1. Why This Book?

You probably already know that academic writing is a complex activity with which you could use a little help. Do you suffer from ‘white page syndrome’ and find it hard to start writing? Do you recognise the feeling that everything you come up with is just not good enough—that your writing hardly matches that ‘perfect text’ you had in mind? When you see the work of colleagues who have already written more than you, do you ever think that you are the only one who struggles to immediately succeed? Do you also think that you are about to be ‘found out’ as a charlatan and that you are not fit to be a scientist, aka ‘imposter syndrome’? You see, there are even syndromes associated with being a writer!

The good news is that you're not alone. After twenty years of experience in the field of academic training and coaching, we can assure you that many scientists, and certainly newly-minted ones, struggle with writing. Even many experienced academics in current academic environments feel the burden of having to write papers and proposals.

We wrote this book for academic writers who struggle with these questions. Of course, advice and support is helpful for novice writers. But experienced writers who want to write with more ease and pleasure can also benefit from our strategies and tips.

We want to reassure you that the process of writing academic texts can be learned, understood and applied with success. The same goes for anyone who has struggled with writing and who has kept postponing their writing because they feel they are not good at it, cannot find the time or hate to write endless versions before their paper is accepted.

No one can tell you exactly what's going to work best for you. It is important that you develop a personal writing routine. With the help of all the tools, tips and tricks you will find in this book, we are confident that you will find the best way to start writing regularly and with pleasure.

As mentioned above, our focus is on the writing process. In this book, we will zoom in on the different skills you need to write effectively and with enjoyment, and we will discuss different writing routines you can try in order to find the routine that works best for you. But before we present the topics that this book addresses, we would like to introduce to you the characteristics of academic writing.

Characteristics of Academic Writing

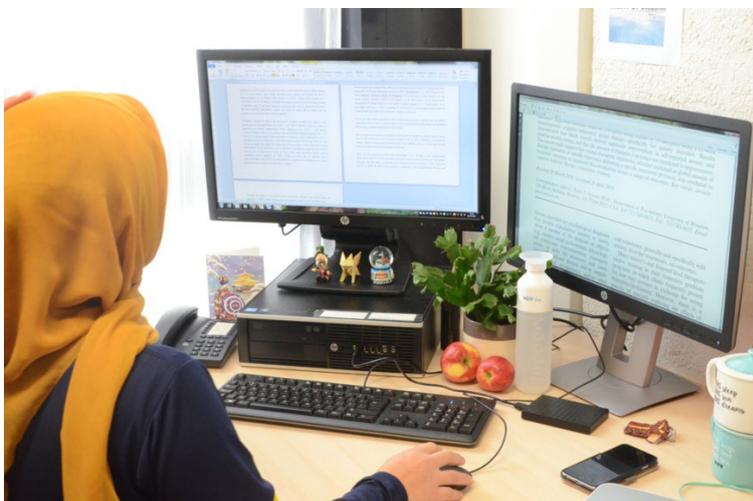


Illustration 1. Writing requires a wide range of skills.

We do not deny that academic writing can be difficult and stressful. It might be helpful to realise that such challenges are largely caused by some of the characteristics of academic writing itself. Let's take a closer look at five of them:

1. Focus on content
2. Learning by trial and error
3. Solitary activity
4. Negative feedback
5. Many different skills involved

1. Focus on content

One important reason that writing is experienced as being difficult is that scientists talk almost exclusively about the *content* of their research (papers). Most researchers are driven by the desire to solve intellectual problems. They strive to read the enormous amount of publications in their field, and their research time is furthermore consumed by study design, data collection and analysis. Their discussions are rarely on the topic of the writing process or on the negative emotions that come with it. They usually simply lack the time and attention to reflect on these things.

2. Learning by trial and error

Oftentimes, manuals (and therefore also novice writers) assume that writing is done according to a 'static writing model' in which you first research and then write a report about it. Simple, right? Not so fast. Assumptions about writing can, especially if you are a beginner, reduce your self-confidence because you do not know that struggle is part of the process. Experienced writers know that writing consists of a laborious process of writing, rewriting, restructuring and gradually discovering what needs to be told—the so-called nonlinear aspect of writing or the seemingly mysterious process of scholarly writing. Learning to write scientific papers can mainly be a matter of trial and error while the real art of writing is rarely taught. Another reason for the difficult learning process could be that staff members who guide students often have no expertise in this because they themselves have not had any training in writing.

We cannot change very much on these first two characteristics because these are inherent in academic culture. But for the next three aspects, we do have some ideas for how to accommodate your life as a writer.

3. Solitary activity

Writing is a solitary activity. If you work in the humanities, this might not be much different from the rest of your work, as your research might largely be a solitary pursuit; however, if you are, for example, a physicist, the contrast can be enormous between working together on an experiment in the lab and writing a paper while sitting behind the computer all by yourself. Some may say that the whole of academia is a lonely place. And as if that is not depressing enough, how about this quote: 'The isolating and competitive atmosphere of academia is enough to produce anxiety and depression in many a doctoral student. Ingrained in all of us is the idea that you're not doing grad school right unless you are regularly home alone in front of your computer. Professors trained under that culture tend to reproduce it in advising their own PhDs.'¹

Fortunately, we know a few ways to make the writing process something that you can share with your peers. We will go into more detail about that in Chapter Eight.

¹ Seamster, L. Why You Need a Writing Group. <https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1829-why-you-need-a-writing-group> June 15, 2017

4. Negative feedback

In addition, you may have experienced getting mostly negative feedback on your writing, during your undergraduate studies, during the PhD programme and, even later, when you are already on the scientific staff when you still receive mainly negative feedback from the reviewers of your papers. Overreliance on negative feedback is a bad habit that demotivates and gnaws at your self-confidence.

Writers also must deal with two conflicting skills, creating and criticising, in which, as a novice writer, you might be best acquainted with the latter. Students receive assignments such as 'critically discuss' and are rarely given the chance to 'creatively develop'.

'The implications for academics are that unless they are guided by sympathetic senior colleagues to manage time, policy and motivation issues, as well as the writing process itself, most will learn their writing skills through a process of trial and error based on comments by reviewers and editors and these may be disheartening for novice writers.'²

Universities could do more, much more, to create group motivation, camaraderie and support for budding writers. That idea fits in well with the characteristics of writing groups, which we will discuss in Chapter Nine.

5. Many different skills

Scientific writing appears to consist of (at least) thirty different skills (see first Appendix). You need to be able to build a storyline, select relevant journals, write to their needs and place your research in the scientific context. Obviously, you need to master the different aspects of written language such as grammar, syntax and vocabulary. Not so obvious might be the so-called self-management and social skills which we think are equally important, such as being able to free up writing time, work according to plan, motivate yourself and stay focused for a longer period, as well as ask for and accept critical feedback, admit mistakes and learn from them.

These skills are what we will focus on in this book.

When you look at these five characteristics, it is understandable that academic writing can feel like a huge obstacle. Fortunately, we have seen profound improvements when researchers start to analyse their writing problems and conclude where their specific problems lie. In the next chapters, we will provide you with tools to make your personal analysis and present possible solutions.

How to read this book?

Below, you will find an overview of the writing skills and other topics that we will address in this book. It is not necessary to read everything in the suggested order, either—feel free to skip chapters and immediately dive into the topics you are interested in.

In Chapter Two, we show you that motivating and at the same time realistic planning is very useful for finishing a paper in a certain time. You can think about the tasks and activities you want to do in addition to writing and how best to combine them. In Chapter Three, we will help you through that difficult starting phase and introduce you to different methods to produce those first words.

Chapter Four describes that not everyone writes in the same way or at the same pace. Are you a morning person? Then it is good to do your most important thinking and writing in the morning and reserve the rest of the day for activities that require less mental energy. For someone who thinks best at night, of course, the opposite applies. But in most cases, it is a good idea to start writing undisturbed for two hours in the morning. 'Undisturbed' means 'turning off' all distractors such as email, phone and (last but not least!) colleagues.

² Kelly, A. (2017) How to Make Writing in the Humanities Less Lonely.

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/how-make-writing-humanities-less-lonely>

In Chapter Five, we look at the place where you write and how to feel inspired by the right music. In Chapter Six, we discuss ways to maintain motivation. Moreover, we describe the different roles that any author needs to play in this creative process and how to stimulate your creativity. In Chapter Seven, we will show how to deal with the procrastination and stress that writing can sometimes evoke. Well-known traps are listening to the inner critic who tells you that what you have written is not good enough, or worse, that you are not a good writer and that you will never learn. That is what many writers think, though fortunately, that is not true.

We look at working with others in Chapter Eight, specifically colleagues and supervisors. How and when do you ask for feedback on your written material? Are you comfortable asking for help? Or do you feel like your writing has to be perfect before you dare to let someone else read it? Do you make good agreements in advance with your co-authors?

Finally, in Chapter Nine, we discuss a method that we are very enthusiastic about: the academic writing group. That is, a group of writers, not necessarily from the same field, who meet regularly to write and exchange experiences about it. We have a lot of experience in guiding online writing groups and have seen how participants progress with their writing and gain more confidence in their struggles with it. Here are some choice comments from the participants themselves:



Illustration 2. Writing support groups can help.

'I found what works for me and stopped punishing myself for not being productive enough.'

'I think I can keep writing because I enjoy writing more than before.'

'First of all, everyone has struggles to focus or write. Second, everyone has the potential to overcome it. The group was helping each other sometimes with tips in the group.'

'I established a writing routine on a daily basis, which I didn't have before.'

'I received tips and guidance on how to manage distractions and how to plan writing to make good progress.'



Illustration 3. In this book, you will find writing tips from a diverse range of authors.

In short: We would like to share with you all our best practices as well as those of our participants from the writing groups to make sure that you will start writing in a pleasant, effective way.