

ACADEMIC WRITING: ENHANCING THE “HAPPY SKILL”

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Abstract:

Writing as a discipline has a tumultuous history. The evolution of writing from being a mere aid to memory to being an independent discipline has been remarkable. Academic writing, the scholastic offspring of writing, is often perceived as a too scholarly to be mastered. Even though academic writing is the cornerstone of all written knowledge, it has hardly been explored in the pedagogical structure. This paper aims to explore the mechanism behind academic writing by tracing the trajectory of writing and moving on to discuss the process of how to write with special focus on academic writing. Apart from discussing “the rules of thumb and tricks of the trade” of writing, this paper will also bring in the reflective and anecdotal aspect of writing. The main aim of this paper is to consider academic writing as what Robert Scholes says “So Happy a Skill”.

Keywords: Academic, writing skills, tenets, oration

Introduction:

Writing is regarded as the basic building block of all scripted language. Since the beginning of time writing had been persistently existing per se in a subdued form. With the establishment of the education system and the increase of the reading public, writing came to the fore as an important skill to be learnt. It is important to mention here that writing had quite a tumultuous history.

The rise of writing as a discipline and the emergence of English as an independent subject is intricately linked together. Robert Scholes in his book *The Rise and Fall of English* (2008) mention that the classical subjects like Greek and Latin dominated the literary scene. English was nowhere in the scene. Towards the close of the nineteenth century and in the first decade of the twentieth century, English quickly gained popularity. Even after the birth of English, English literature did not a pride of place in the academic scenario. There were no teacher of English, there were only professors of Rhetoric or Oratory of Belles Lettres. Grammar was given a little bit of attention and Literature existed only in the “service of verbal decorum, morality, or taste” (4, Scholes). Even though writing was a requirement for every student, their assignments were structured like speeches, some of which they had to memorize and present in front of an audience. The result was that students’ writing were poor. “Writing was not initially seen as an intellectual source of power but rather a functional skill that served, at best, as a facilitator of the oral tradition of education” (15, Murphy). Writing existed only as an aid to memory. This neglect of writing

continued with till the end of 19th century. Alexander Bain, a Professor of Logic and rhetoric from 1860 to 1880 at Aberdeen, UK, laid down that the English class would include "the higher Elements of English Grammar; the Principles of Rhetoric, applied to English Composition, and some portion of the history of English Literature" (199, Murphy). The downfall of Oration or Rhetoric started with mandate from universities to include entrance examinations as a criterion for getting admissions into the universities. Around the 1870s, when student enrollment started to rise, these pupils were thought to be lacking in writing abilities, notably in mechanics and correctness of writing. When results came out parents, educators, and the general public became concerned about this alleged weakness. Writing as a discipline found a footing in the academia after a prolonged struggle. The development of writing as a separate academic field began at the tail end of the 1800s. According to David Russell, there was a significant transition from the rhetorical tactics and oratory traditions to the writing discipline in order to "meet the burgeoning industries for specialists in science, engineering, agriculture and commerce." Despite its vibrancy and greater authenticity, oratory suffered from a number of problems. When academicians realized the shortcomings of oration, writing took its place.

What is Academic Writing?

With rise of the reading public, writing also flourished exponentially. The different ramifications of writing were explored. Academic writing is a major branch of writing which is related to the academic spheres or topics. Academic writing is formal, well-organised, clear, economical, grammatically accepted, is authentic, so on and so forth. Academic writing is different from creative writing in terms of its tonality, presentation, structure and language.

Academic writing encapsulates the writing which is included in textbooks, research papers, official documents etc. Abbreviations and contracted forms of the verbs are not encouraged to be used in academic writing. Writers are expected to support their arguments with proper with proper evidences and reasons. This genre of writing does not entertain emotional language. Language is crisp, succinct and formal. The presence of these discussed traits in a writing is what makes for academic writing.

Tools of Writing

One needs the basic tools of writing to start the act of writing. One might ask why do we need the tools for writing. The simple reason is that if we are unaware of the tools, we might very well be using rusty and incompetent tools. Mind is the foremost tool without which an intellectual activity like writing cannot be accomplished. A good vocabulary, knowledge of the rules of syntax, knowledge of grammatical structures are the other basic tools of writing that we need. Apart from these, the physical accompaniments are also an integral part of writing. Tony Judt, a renowned author, affirms that the writing accoutrements are an essential component of the writing process. According to his writing theory, writing itself is not the ultimate goal of the writing process. The tools or instrumentalities that support this process are even more crucial. Just as important as the

act of writing is the physical and tactile parts of it, such as the joyous sensation of touching the pen and paper and realizing their existence. Jennifer Homans states in her 2012 piece ‘Tony Judt: A Final Victory’; “Writing has a pulse, a rhythm, a feel, a posture, and a tempo that connects minds to the page. It also involves the physical self—pens, paper, and keyboards—the touch the connecting minds to the page; it has a rhythm, a feel, a posture and pacing, a pulse through the body.”

The Writing Process

Maxine Hairstone and Micheal Keene in their book *Successful Writing* (2003) lay down the stages of writing which are believed to be followed by professional writers across the globe. The first stage of writing is Preparation or planning. This stage is also known as the stage of brainstorming or pre-writing where a vague cluster of ideas inter your mind. Neither the sentences nor the ideas are clearly visible to the author. Stephen Mc Laren in his book *Easy Writer* (2004) writes:

“the pre-writing stage could be usefully defined as all the work you do between being given the assignment, and starting to draft your essay. It starts with defining and exploring the question, then devising a plan of action for your research and writing, reading and taking notes, sketching a rough summary of your initial ideas, starting to plan the essay, and starting to incubate” (17).

This stage is important because it is where the actual work starts. The next stage is the stage of writing the first draft. The thoughts are in a muddled stage and they flow in an unrestrained way. It is important to note here that the writers have to concentrate on the structure, ideas and arguments of the writing rather than on the wordings and presentation. As Stephen Mc Laren says the first draft is often “garbled” draft where the ideas are poured down roughly to the page. In this process of writing, it is necessary for the writer to find his or her own pace. Some writers work fast (they are known as ‘sprinters’) and some take their time put words to the page (they are known as ‘plodders’). It is the discretion of the writers to find out to which category they belong to and accordingly plan their writing. The next stage is “incubating” where you let the ideas percolate in the brain. After finishing the first draft some writers go for walking, others go for swimming, some go for meditation. By engaging themselves in these activities, they allow the brain to function away from the writing. When the writer comes back to writing he might experience an awakening or he might perceive his writing in a better way. The stage of incubation helps in the holistic development of writing but should be alert so to not spend too much time away from his writing. The stage of revising is the most important stage of writing. In this stage, the writer has to examine or read his own writing with a critical lens. Colson Whithead’s advice in his article “How to Write” nails the point. He says “Don’t fall into the gentle trilling of your mellifluous sentences. Learn how to “kill your darlings””. While revising the draft, writers should take out the unnecessary words or phrases that do not add value to the draft. Rambling sentences should be crafted into clear ones, coherence of the whole draft should be maintained. Writers those who are interested to work

in groups may make their writing public so to understand the impact of their words on the audience. A pivotal point to remember is whether the writing is audience oriented and purposeful.

Redrafting and editing or proofreading are the final two phases of writing. It's time to write the second draft after the writer has sharpened the first. Writers typically rework the draft two or three times at this point in order to polish it. These subsequent drafts are less mistake-prone, more succinct and concise. After the final draft, there comes the last stage of proof reading the draft and sending it for publication.

What Makes Academic Writing Successful?

Academic writing should be clear, well organized, economical, grammatically acceptable, should have vigour and goal orientated. It need not necessarily be drab or monotonous. The freshness in academic writing comes from the apt use of words, the clarity in thought. Linkes and nudges which are otherwise known as discourse markers should be timely used to navigate the readers. Nudges are terms that gives readers a little push from one point to the next and keep them moving in the right direction.

Defining the purpose and structuring paragraphs properly holds the attention of the readers. If one plans to write a research paper, it is advisable to have an argumentative edge. Writers should try to make their writing reader-centric and not writer-centric. Academic writing must be organized in several levels. The primary organization should be in a linear manner starting with introduction, moving on body and conclusion. The discussion topics in the body should be further organized. Stephen Mc Laren terms the second and third levels together as "hierarchy of points". Academic writers should keep the form and attitude formal, break long sentences into shorter ones, avoid sexist language or unparliamentary words, avoid "deadwood nouns". "Deadwood nouns" are nouns that end with -ity, -tion, -ness, -ance, -ment etc.. Some typical examples of "deadwood nouns" are capability, cognizance, immediacy, modernity, utilization etc. Academic writing negates the use of contracted form like isn't, don't, can't. Besides these academic writing uses formal expression like however, however, in addition to, furthermore, therefore, to conclude.

There are certain tenets of writing which writers should remember throughout the writing process. Writers wait for a good amount of time looking for inspiration. One should start writing whether they feel like it or not. Making it a part of the daily schedule will help writers to generate ideas. Materials for writing should be gathered constantly. It is important to set a deadline which helps writer to complete a work in time. Work slowly but consistently as too much of haste will leave many loose ends. It is to be remembered that writing is not an innate quality, it is a skill which requires constant honing.

Conclusion

Writing is a refined process that goes through several phases of development. Nonetheless, the procedure must be planned with the linguistic integrity necessary to support its content and rigorously uphold clarity in mind. Like any other skill, academic writing can be practised without any inhibitions. “The skill of a writer is a happy one” and it should be happily explored.

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