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Empowering Higher Education Students to Take Charge of Their Writing: Another Dimension of Literacy

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"Good writing isn't forged by magic or hatched out of thin air. Good writing happens when human beings take particular steps to take control of their sentences, to make their words do what they want them to do" (Fletcher, 2000, p. 5)

Most students enter my higher education classes uncertain about writing in an academic voice. In an attempt to solve their writing dilemmas, at the beginning of each semester I offer a Saturday workshop in which I provide an overview of the tenets of exemplary academic writing. I also present some in-class guided writing instruction.

In addition, for many semesters I edited (i.e., corrected) their writing problems. Then I offered opportunities for them to follow my editing suggestions and return their assignments for a final grade. I noted these activities improved students' academic writing abilities. However, many continued to feel insecure about turning in assignments, or writing for publication.

I recently concluded by editing my students' assignments, I did all the work, and thus, contributed to their lack of confidence and their capacity to exercise control over their writing. To try to rectify these concerns, I made a decision to place students in charge of their writing and to situate me not as a teacher who corrects writing problems, but as a writing coach who supports students' abilities to appraise their own writing. Accordingly, I offer the information in this chapter to empower students to self-regulate their academic writing, make sound composing decisions, and feel confident in their writing efforts.

I begin this "How to Article" by explaining why it is necessary for students to follow tenets of exemplary academic writing (*I do this because each semester a few students ask me why they need to learn how to write in an academic voice*). I then describe authors' composing styles and the recursive nature of composing. Next, I offer an extensive list of Academic Writing Principles I created for my students followed by a suggested model of exemplary writing. I also guide them through excerpts of my own published writing to the components listed on the model. I emphasize there are many ways to structure an exemplary academic writing piece depending upon writers' goals and topics. I close this article with a "Putting it All Together" section

What is Academic Writing?

Academic writing is neither effortless nor commonplace (Richards & Roth, 2019). It is a style of writing we, who publish have had to master (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2007). This style of writing follows specific expectations of written academic language recommended in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA), 7th ed.*) (also refer to the Purdue Writing Lab, at "owlpurdue.edu"). Therefore, a first step toward exemplary academic writing is to become familiar with the current *APA* manual. I find this manual useful but not particularly easy to navigate. Take note! Following *APA* format is only the first step in authors' academic writing journey.

What Else Do You Need to Know?

As scholars, we all need to know our own composing style; that is, our own idiosyncratic writing processes - in other words, what works best for us (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2007). Writing experts typify authors as adhering to a specific composing style, or a blend of styles. They categorize these distinctive ways of writing as: a) Heavy

Planners who characteristically organize their manuscripts prior to writing; b) Heavy Revisers who forgo planning and instead revise as they write; c) Sequential Composers who devote equivalent time to planning and revising; d) Procrastinators who seem to enjoy pressure created by deadlines, and; e) Discovery Writers who find out what they want to write and need to know about their topic through the process of writing (Ede, 1988; Morss & Murray, 2001; Richards & Miller, 2006). I am a Discovery, Heavy Reviser writer. That means I take a considerable amount of time to complete a piece because I discover what I want to write as I compose, and I revise and re-revise and then revise again as I move through a manuscript. Since I am a heavy revisionist, I always start to write sooner rather than later. I could never procrastinate and then write rapidly to meet a looming deadline. I am a tenacious, steady, persevering writer who writes every day even if I write for only 30 minutes on Saturday and Sunday. Sometimes I am at my computer for hours. When I finally stand up, my knees hurt because they have been bent so long. l also am unable to create an outline to plan what I want to say prior to writing. A case in point is recently I was asked to supply an outline for a book chapter. In order to create the outline, I had to write the chapter first and then create the outline from the completed chapter. When the outline was accepted, I had already written the chapter. I have exhibited the same writing behavior for years because it works for me. So, what type of writer are you? You need to know who you are as a writer of academic prose and cultivate a style of writing that makes you feel most comfortable.

You Also Need to Know about the Recursive Stages of the Writing Process

Although I devote this section of the chapter to the stages of writing, many writers do not specifically follow these *step-by-step*- patterns of composing. Writing is a

recursive process. By that I mean, writers may write a sentence or a paragraph or two and then go back and alter a word, or phrase. Or they may write a few pages and then revise or edit. Still, others might complete a section of a draft and then revise and edit their work. *In fact, I wrote this section last week but, yesterday changed the term 'lock-step' to 'step-by-step' and now, the following day, I am once again, rereading this section).* All writers write differently (Richards & Miller, 2006).

Stage1: Invention: We consider the first stage of writing the invention phase in which writers engage in specific prewriting techniques. Yet, many authors do not specifically engage in structured planning. For example, Donald Murray (1987) thinks writing is a process of discovery. He states, *"writers much of the time don't know what they are going to write … [and they] use language as a tool of exploration to see beyond what they know" (p. 90)*. But, in contrast to Murray's statement, some renowned authors plan considerably before they write. For example, prior to composing, J. K. Rowling, author of the famous Harry Potter series, meticulously plans her novels by filling in and color- coding large charts (see "planning write" J. K. Rowling).

As a doctoral candidate I did not plan my writing enough. As a result, I struggled with the beginning of my dissertation because I did not know what I wanted to write. As a result, my dissertation file overflowed with pages of abandoned first paragraphs. I now recognize even though I am a discovery/high revision writer I do think about ideas for a book, chapter, or manuscript. I just do not write my ideas down, or plan in a systematic way. Instead, I ponder some possible ideas. Then I write a few sentences or paragraphs and "see" or discover where writing takes me. If you think you might benefit from planning your writing systematically rather than contemplating possible ideas like me,

you might want to consider some of following strategies my students find helpful: Creating Sketch Journals and Drawings; Generating Concept Maps and Webs; Engaging in Free Writing; Listing Questions You May Have about a Topic; Thinking Aloud and Speaking into a Tape Recorder; Talking about Your Ideas with Others; Making Lists; Devising Venn Diagrams; Constructing an Outline, and; Combining Invention Strategies (e.g., a concept map combined with a Flow Chart). On-line writing invention sites are also available (refer to Richards & Miller, 2005, for a complete description of these strategies and resources).

Stage 2: Drafting: Some writers do their prewriting like me, trying out ideas and discovering as they write a draft. Others begin writing by moving back and forth between invention and drafting. There is no perfect formula for writing a draft except to sit down and write. Drafting takes perseverance, motivation, and hard work. Furthermore, you cannot write a cohesive draft unless you know a lot about your topic. But, if you find you cannot move forward with your draft, do not excuse yourself and say you have writer's block. Pay attention to what Donald Murray noted (2001). He said, "*There is no such thing as writer's block. My father drove a truck for forty years. And never once did he wake up in the morning and say, "I have truck driver's block today. I am not going to work."* I agree with Murray. Murray knows writer's block is no excuse for not writing. If I cannot think of what else to write I do not have writer's block. I have reader's block. I have not learned enough about my topic, which was another one of my problems writing the beginning of my dissertation. Yet, I also know delaying writing a draft over time is useless for me. I, like other discovery writers, must see what I wrote to know what I think and want to say.

Stage 3: Revision: The Heart of Writing: Murray (2001) believes *"writing is revision…through revising we learn about what we know, what we know that we didn't know we knew, what we didn't know" (p. 9 vii)*. And I add, "What we need to know." Revision often requires writers to make major changes, such as moving small, or large sections of text to other places in a manuscript, composing more paragraphs, or adding or deleting sections of text to make ideas clearer. As with the other stages of writing, there are no magic prescriptions, or formulae for the revision process. Some writers, like me, prefer to revise as they write and then they revise and revise again even after they think they have finished their manuscripts. Others complete an entire draft and then revise. Zinser (2006) says, "There are all kinds of writers and all kinds of methods, and any method that helps you to say what you want to say is the right method for you" (p. 5).

Stage 4: Editing: (*Note my use of active voice in this and other sections***).** Now we get to my favorite part of the writing process. I have revised and re-revised and revised my manuscript. I have placed topics under appropriate subheadings. I have a completed draft. Relief!!!! *Am I ready to edit my work? Yes, even though I have edited as I write. I can never edit enough. "*Editing is finishing. Editing is making a text convey precisely what you intend to say in the clearest way possible. Editing is sentence level work, attended to after a text's ideas are in order" (Fulwiler, 2002, p. 178).

A Systematic Editing Plan

I tell my students I edit a manuscript at least 100 times but they don't believe me. They think I am speaking metaphorically. Yet, I do engage in considerable editing. I edit so much I know every word I have written and I know why I chose each word in my manuscript. I have organized "A List of Academic Writing Principles" to guide my students' editing

efforts and I, too, follow these tenets (refer to the next section for this list). I advise my students to keep this list by their computers. I tell them, "*When you think you have completed revising your final draft, use the Academic Writing Principles list in the following way. Choose the first statement on the list and go through your entire document editing your writing in accord with this first statement. For example, the first recommendation on the list below is, 'Above all write in active voice.' Heed this advice and edit the entire document accordingly. Now read the second recommendation on the list, 'Limit use of weak 'ing' verbs, such as walking, reading, running.' Once again, go through your entire manuscript and edit appropriately (e.g., I walk; She read; He ran).*" My students follow this procedure with each suggestion on the list until they reach the last tenet, which is, '*Create a final title when your draft is complete and revised and edited. The title reflects the content of your manuscript. APA titles contain no more than 12-15 words*.'" Is this editing process time consuming? Well, yes! Is this process worthwhile? Yes again. As you check your manuscripts with each statement on the list after a few weeks you will notice you have memorized some of the tenets listed and have automatically written in accordance with some of the recommendations. Therefore, it takes you less time to methodically check your work. Not only that – you have become an active participant in your own writing and you will get top grades on your assignments.

A List of Academic Writing Principles

1. Above all else write in active voice (e.g., " I (or we, or they) collected the data" rather than, "Data were collected by me (or them). If you have to ask "By whom?" You have composed a passive voice construction. Use of the passive voice takes the

researcher/writer out of the text and makes the writing awkward and the reading slow (Gephart, 1986).

2. Limit use of weak 'ing' verbs (e. g. "He was reading"; "He was running"). (Write "He read"; "He ran").

3. Limit use of adverbs, such as brilliantly, decidedly, and lovely, and adjectives, such as, great, bad, and good.

4. Delete unnecessary use of the word, **that**. Count the number of times you use the word, **that** in your manuscript and delete when you can. I think you will be surprised. Also note how few **that's** there are in this chapter.

5. Refer to people as who – not as that (e.g., "People **who** ate the hamburgers were hungry").

6. Avoid wordiness. Delete unnecessary words.

7. Always place a comma before the word, which unless you write, "In which case."

8. Use the words that or what in place of the word, which if you can. An editor told me when I wrote my first book, "*Which is not an attractive word*."

9. Remember -- good writing is good thinking.

10. Start off with a simple on-topic sentence. Don't digress. Don't take forever to get to the point. My linguistics professor once crossed off the first three pages of a manuscript I turned in for a grade. On the fourth pages he wrote, **FINALLY!!!**

11. Avoid jargon and acronyms unless you first explain their meaning. Acronyms are special words, initials, phrases, or expressions used by a particular profession, or group and are difficult for others to understand (e.g., ADHD for a chronic condition marked by persistent inattention, hyperactivity, and sometimes impulsivity).

12. Vary vocabulary, but if you begin your manuscript using the term student stick with that term. Don't switch to children or pupils.

13. Be writer hot – reader/critic cold. Put your writing away for a day or two. Then, review your work with a critical eye.

14. Monitor your writing at every word. Know exactly what you say and why.

15. Remember time spent revising and editing is time well spent.

16. End a sentence with something other than a preposition. Prepositions include the words, 'are'. 'to', 'under', 'over', 'at') (see https://www.talkenglish.com/vocabulary/top-50-prepositions.aspx).

17. Erase these words from your writing vocabulary: **very,** or **really**.

18. Always begin a new paragraph after dialogue, such as in a conversation indicated by quotation marks.

19. Consider your audience at all times. Guide your audience through your report with sub headings.

20. Data are always plural.

21. If you want to publish your research keep in mind that studies cannot explore anything. Only researchers can explore phenomena. Do not anthropomorphize your inquiry and write, "This study explored…" The study is inert. Studies cannot think. Write, "In this study I (or we) explored …"

23. Always write "We (or I) believe (or perceive or think"). Remove the word **feel** from your academic writing vocabulary (e.g., "I **feel** our study was appropriate"). Remember we only **feel** in love, ill, heartbroken, mad, or confused. We also **feel** with our hands.

24. Do not switch back and forth between active and passive voice.

25. Edit one problematic writing issue at a time**.**

26. Write, “It is likely” or, “In all probability” rather than make absolute statements.

27. Write the Abstract that follows directly after the title page of a manuscript after you have completed your final draft. The Abstract is a succinct summary of **your** purpose, research questions, methods, discoveries, and conclusions. (Note-not the paper’s purpose, etc. Your purpose follows the structure and content of your manuscript).

28. Create a final title when your draft is complete and revised and edited. The title reflects the content of your manuscript to help scholars find topics of interest.

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