

# Developing Academic Writing

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## Abstract

Proof of academic writing skills is often asked of both educators and their students: research proposals, peer-reviewed publications, and scholarship applications are just a few ways in which in which better writing can bring opportunities to teachers and learners alike. Yet despite the clear benefits, improving the quality of academic writing is an under-researched area, and this is especially true for those for whom English is a foreign language.

The development of academic writing is described in two ways: first, by discussing how scholars can improve their own writing; and second, by showing what instructors can do to help their students. To this end, two separate lines of enquiry, those of reader expectation and content-based writing instruction, are explored. Together, these approaches can enable both academics and learners to improve their academic writing skills.

## Keywords

Content-based writing; reader expectation

## 1 Introduction

Views on what and how to teach in academic writing classes vary widely. This range of views extends from positions of accommodation, which encourage learners to understand and follow current norms, to critical perspectives that challenge students to question the assumptions and standards that make up typical academic discourse. Those who lean towards accommodationist positions believe that such instruction will benefit students in their future careers (Swales, 2004), while academics critical of such an approach contend that it is – among other things – an educator's ethical duty to disrupt the status quo, for example, Cadman's discussion on curricular innovation (Cadman, 2002).

Criticism of academic writing and its instruction is for many teachers, however, a luxury position: there is pressure to research and publish, and few of our students come to us seeking an undermining of

everything they have worked for. What, then, can teachers acquire from current models of writing instruction, and how can they best pass such knowledge and skills on to those who learn from them?

Writing intended for publication can potentially be improved at two levels; first, knowledge of norms that affect papers in their entirety, and second, at a more focused level whereby particular sections of a paper such as introductions can benefit through knowledge gained from research into academic writing. At the paper level, considerations such as positioning, comprised of factors including audience, organization, flow, and presentation are important, as is the shape, or movement, that occurs. Typical movement examples include general to specific and problem, process, solution movement (Swales and Feak, 2004).

At the section level, two approaches to development can be found. First, by focusing on the roles played by individual sentences and paragraphs, for example Fish's discussion of whether to use an additive or subordinating style within sentences (Fish, 2011), or Bean's discussion of content in contrast with function (Bean, 1996). A second strategy is to pursue the specific recommendations of academic writing researchers, such as the rhetorical moves commonly made in each section, how to claim space for one's research, or the differing forms that sections can take. A much researched example is the literature review: common examples include narrative reviews, systematic reviews, focused reviews, and meta-analytical reviews (Feak and Swales, 2009). Studies of meta-analytical reviews (Cooper, 2010) have produced a taxonomy of literature reviews, the use of which could potentially improve the quality of many papers.

If a teacher's own writing can be improved through knowledge of academic norms and the finer points of individual sections of a paper, then what of student writing? It is clear that knowledge alone will not suffice. Students not only need practice, they also need a method that enables

them to develop into junior members of the professions they hope to enter: in other words writing about what they study, in academic forms. Shih (1986) describes five approaches to such content-centered methods, each with its own strengths for different situations. Research findings from these approaches suggest that content-based instruction closely mirrors the skills needed in “real-world” settings, and thus is highly compatible with the teacher making use of paper-wide and section level features in the classroom. As such, then, the teacher’s own development aids the student in hers. Content based approaches are perhaps the most suitable way in which accommodation with genuine, high quality academic writing can be reached.

Thus far, I have argued that content-based instruction and an accommodationist position will do the most to help teachers help learners. Ultimately, however, successful writing depends on what meaning the reader arrives at. It is entirely possible to write following all the academic norms, and yet leave the reader utterly lost or misinformed. Why is this? *Reader Expectation* – a term coined by Williams (2002), and later expanded on by Gopen (2004) – is an account of what most readers expect from a text, most of the time. What Williams and Gopen argue is that readers have a relatively limited set of expectations, and that by meeting them, writers become much more successful at conveying their message. Instances of powerful expectations include that the most important information in a sentence be placed in a stress position, that is, just prior to a point of syntactic closure such as a full stop. Other reader expectations are that old information will precede new information in a sentence, and that each sentence will tend to lean forward into the next, thus allowing the reader to follow the flow of the writer’s thought without the need to retrace his steps.

Reader expectation can be applied to other forms of writing, but its impact on the clarity of academic work, and the effect its use has on those learning to write academically is too great to ignore. Furthermore, reader expectation can be taught incrementally, as students learn about academic writing, through a content-based approach, thus bringing together two previously separate, but compatible, forms of instruction.

## 2 Conclusion

Developing academic writing is a challenge, but one that can be met through an understanding of what readers expect from a text, authentic use of content, and a knowledge

of the conventions. Combined use of these three allows teachers not only to develop their own writing, but also that of their students.

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