

The Write Stuff: The Secrets of Successful Academic Writing

Most academics rarely write. A quarter of the nation's 40,000 faculty members report spending no hours a week writing. Almost 27 percent have never published a peer-reviewed article; and 42 percent haven't published anything within the past two years. Over three out of five academics will never publish a book.

All told just 28 percent of academics have produced more than two publications in the last two years.

But academic success requires writing. Don't write out of a sense of obligation. Write because you have something to say and because you want to shape the future of your discipline.

The Facts of Life

1. *Writing is hard work.*

Every writer procrastinates, gets anxious, and loses focus. As undergraduates, many develop a bad habit of binge writing—waiting to the last minute to complete assignments. To compensate, write every day.

Model writing on weight loss: Strive for small, daily advances rather than attempting to do everything all at once.

2. *Writing is thinking.*

It's during the writing process that you will generate many of your best ideas. Writing engages thinking, reveals thinking, and clarifies thinking.

3. *Writing is not a solitary activity.*

Successful writers make writing a social activity. They talk out their ideas. They ask for and get feedback.

4. *Don't sweat the small stuff.*

We tend to on the micro-aspects of writing: word choice, grammar, passive voice. The real challenge is larger:

- identifying a question worth addressing;
- establishing a provocative argument or hypothesis,
- creating a logical structure, paragraph by paragraph;
- having a dialogue with a larger scholarly debate; and
- finding and utilizing providing evidence effective.

5. *There is no writing, only rewriting.*

It's during revisions that you refine your argument, improve the paper's structure, and address counter-arguments and contrary evidence.

The Seven Deadly Sins of Academic Writing

1. *Unclear, wordy sentences.*

Delete unnecessary words. Be concise!



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2. Inflated verbiage

Whenever possible, avoid jargon, intensifiers (very, really, totally, completely, truly), and adverbs (-ly words)

3. Vacuous topic sentences and weak concluding sentences

Grab the reader's attention—and don't let it stray.

4. Overuse of the words "is," "are," "was," and "were" and verbs that end with "ing"

Use active verbs.

5. Passive voice

When you write in the passive voice, the subject receives an action. Write sentences in which the subject performs an action

6. Sloppiness

Misplaced modifiers, dangling propositions, pronoun problems, incorrect punctuation, sexist language, and typos.

7. The absence of a well-developed, well substantiated argument

Effective writing is always argumentative. It responds to ongoing debates. It closes gaps in the scholarship, debunks myths and misconceptions, complicates a topic, takes sides in a debate, recasts a debate, or refines or rebuts generalizations, . And it consider counterarguments.

Writing a Cover Letter

The purpose of the cover letter is two-fold:

- to sell yourself and
- to demonstrate that there is a good fit between your background and the advertised position.

Most cover letters follow a common format. But the execution varies significantly. Don't be generic. Identify those skills and areas of expertise and accomplishment that set you apart from others.

Paragraph 1: Identify the position you are applying for.

"I would like to be considered for your assistant professorship in...."

Paragraph 2: Identify yourself.

Take advantage of the fact that you are at Columbia and have studied with recognized faculty mentors.

"I am currently a doctoral student in the Department of ... at Columbia University, where I studied under the direction of and expect to receive my Ph.D. in May 2009."

Paragraph 3: Describe your dissertation -- and underscore its significance.

My dissertation, a study of ...,

Explain why your dissertation is special: How it addresses a previously neglected topic; how it contributes to a significant scholarly debate; how it employs untapped evidence.

Paragraph 4: Describe the breadth of your expertise and experience.

"In addition to my expertise in ..., I also have extensive experience in ..."

Paragraph 5: Describe your teaching experience and the range of courses that you can offer.

You might also briefly describe your pedagogical approach (e.g., engaging students in hands-on research).

Paragraph 6: Elaborate on your distinctive qualifications and strengths.

Describe any honors you have received or skills and experiences that set you apart from other candidates. Have you organized any lectures or conferences? Have you taken part in an interdisciplinary seminar? Have you assisted with

a study abroad program?

Writing a Dissertation

The best dissertations are not a mere survey of data. They ask important questions and advance an argument.

Step 1: Review the relevant literature on your topic.

Step 2: Identify the questions that you will address.

Step 3: Focus -- Don't cover too broad a topic.

Step 4: Write an effective dissertation prospectus – which will provide the outline for your dissertation.

Step 5: Expand sections in your prospectus into sections of your dissertation.

Practical Advice

Don't wait to write. Write even as you conduct your research.

Write the introduction and conclusions last.

Bear in mind the old adage: The only good dissertation is a finished dissertation.

The Dissertation's Form

A dissertation's structure varies widely depending on your discipline. In the humanities and many of the social sciences, a dissertation does not follow a prescribed formula. Rather, your challenge is to craft a narrative. Write chapters separately, following the outline in your prospectus, and integrate the pieces into a flowing narrative at the end.

In the natural sciences and some of the social sciences, a dissertation often must include the following sections:

An Abstract

A brief summary of the dissertation. Describe the problem and the research approach. Emphasize your original contributions.

The Problem

Identify the problem you are addressing and why it is important. Also a statement of your hypothesis.

A Literature Review

Summarize the existing literature.

Definitions

Precisely, concisely, and unambiguously define key terms and concepts.

Theoretical Framework or Conceptual Model

The model or framework that underlies your research and analysis.

Methodology

Your strategies and tools for data gathering and analysis.

Findings and Discussion

More than a description of your findings, you should relate your findings to those reported by other studies.

Corollaries and Consequences

Describe variations, extensions, or other applications of your hypothesis.

Conclusions

Summarize what was learned and how it can be applied. Discuss possibilities for future research.

Writing a Professional Book Review

Writing a book review is the easiest way to build up your publication record. But there is a vast difference between a book review that is merely competent and one that is truly impressive. Remember, a review is not a book report.

A competent book review simply summarizes a book's contents, methodology, and arguments. A professional review is both a summary and an evaluation of a book. It situates a book in a broader scholarly context, explaining how the book addresses broader conceptual, methodological, and theoretical issues. It locates a book within a broader scholarly conversation.

How to write a BAD book review

There are several ways to write a bad book review.

-- *Repeat the publisher's blurb.*

-- *Simply summarize a book's contents.*

-- *Adopt the steamroller approach, criticizing every one of the book's errors, stylistic quirks, and methodological and interpretative inadequacies.*

-- *Fail to tell the reader how the book fits into a larger body of literature on the subject.*

How to write a successful book review

When writing a book review, ask yourself a series of questions:

1. Why did the author write the book?
2. How might readers find the book useful?
3. How does the book relate to other scholarship in the discipline?
4. How does the book contribute to, refine, or argue against, other similar scholarship?

Remember, sometimes a book's main themes or thesis are implicit. Your job is to understand why the author wrote the book as it is. Also, like all effective academic writing, a book review should have a clear focus and a coherent argument.

Writing a Journal Article

Submitting Your Essay

Submitting an essay for publication is a time consuming and frustrating experience. But the response you receive will improve your scholarship. You will learn a lot about your discipline's standards, forms of argument, and methods of evaluation. You will learn how your essay can be reframed, refocused, and better argued.

Editors have a great deal of discretion

Journal editors decide which manuscripts will be reviewed, who will review them, and which articles will be published. But editors, who might receive 300 or more submissions a year, rely heavily on blind reviews. Generally, an editor receives three or four reviews of a submission

Academic publishing is based on double blind review.

The referee knows nothing about the author; the referee's judgment must be based solely on the quality of the work. Similarly, the author knows nothing about the referee, protecting the reviewer from retaliation.

The turn-down rate is high.

Develop a thick skin. Remember, your article is not you. Often, a journal's rejection rate is 90 percent. Across disciplines, the rejection rate is around 80 percent.

Few articles are published without revision.

Over the past ten years, not a single article in the American Historical Review was published without substantial revision.

The turn-around time is long.

The review process generally takes 3-4 months for smaller journals and 6-10 months for larger ones.

Note: It is unethical to submit an article to more than one journal at a time.

What gets published?

1. An article that asks a worthwhile question.

Frame your essay in a compelling way. Link your essay to a fundamental debate in your discipline, either a substantive or methodological debate.

Other approaches to framing an article—which are less successful—involve filling a gap in the scholarship or showcasing the latest intellectual fad or method.

2. An article that presents its argument clearly in the first couple of pages.

3. Articles that are submitted to the appropriate journal.

Every discipline has a range and hierarchy of journals: general, specialty, interdisciplinary, rigorously refereed, and so on. Figure out which journal is right for your article.

4. Authors that pay attention to guidelines.

Don't submit an article that is too long or too short.

Transforming a Dissertation into a Book

Dissertations can be formulaic and schematic, with a separate literature review, methodological discussion, and conclusions. A book, in contrast, must have a compelling narrative, with the background, methods, and theory woven in.

A book needs to be more interesting and less pedantic than a dissertation.

It must be readable!

It needs to have a clear focus and point of view.

A book, unlike a dissertation, must have a central idea or argument.

It also needs to be far more succinct and focused.

Trim all fat! Delete chapters that don't directly relate to your theme.

Specifics:

The Title: The title should accurately reflect the book's contents and argument. Don't overpromise. Be professional.

The Introduction: The introduction and opening chapters must be especially accessible and compelling.

Literature Review: Significantly reduce your review of the scholarly literature. Readers want to read your book.

Narrative Flow: A book should have a narrative arc and flow. Move digressions to the end notes. Relegate extensive methodological discussions to appendices. Don't overquote.

Conclusions: Don't leave your conclusions to the manuscript's end. Spell them out in the introduction, which is your chance to frame readers' understanding of your argument.

Style: Remove all give-aways that the manuscript began as a dissertation (for example, the phrase "this dissertation").

Writing a Successful Grant Proposal

Anything worth doing should be paid for by someone other than you!

To write a successful grant proposal, it's essential that you address the criteria used to evaluate the proposal.

Needs Assessment: Does the proposal document a clear need for the project?

Goals: Has the applicant carefully defined the project's goals and objectives? Its target audience? The project's activities?

Quality: Is the project grounded in solid scholarship?

Significance: Is the intellectual significance of the subjects, themes, and interpretive format clear?

Innovation: Is the project innovative?

Credentials: Does the applicant have the credentials to suggest that the project will be completed in the proposed time frame?

Support: Are the letters of reference strongly supportive of the application?

Plan: Has the applicant set out a realistic plan of action?

Budget: Is the project budget appropriate to the project's goals? Is the budget sufficiently detailed to ensure that the funds will be properly used?

Outcome: What will be your project's outcome?