

Writing to survive in the academy and thrive in the professions: Making writing happen in your classroom

Writing is at the heart of the academy, at the heart of the economy, and at the heart of self-esteem. As scholars, we create and maintain credibility by communicating verbally (and non-verbally) with the right words and actions for the right reasons in the right places at the right time to the right people. We do this mainly by writing.

We owe it to our students to help them to enhance their writing self-efficacy (confidence and competence). Share with students how important writing is to you as an academic. Always write with students. Nothing that you can say about the importance of writing will survive the evidence that you don't think it's important to do it yourself.

Writing is a mainstream activity in most professions (though it is often devalued and marginalised until there is a crisis). Employers want 'gold-collar' workers with analytical thinking skills who can formulate cogent arguments and present evidence to support their assertions. As entry-level employees, graduates will face a constant and complex array of writing tasks that will rely on their rhetorical sensitivity and sophistication. They need to be able to confidently articulate ideas in compelling, logical, coherent, economical prose. The better students are as writers, the further they can go, academically and professionally. When students gain power over their writing, they gain power over their life—intellectually, socially, and politically

That writing ability is critical to graduates' employability and promotability in the writing-reliant workplace is undeniable.

The ultimate goal of a writing program is to integrate writing as a teaching and learning tool in all disciplines within the university. When segments of the university share the responsibility for students' writing and reinforce the value of writing, students will write and think and learn more effectively. **Students learn more when they write.**

The writing-thinking-learning connection: the heuristic potential of writing as a means of reflecting and learning about subject matter.

In his 1925 book *The ABC of Relativity*, George Bernard Shaw provocatively claimed that 'Most people would die sooner than think—in fact, they do'. Shaw must have been referring to people who don't write, because anyone who writes knows how writing helps thinking.

Stephen King: 'Writing is refined thinking'. Oscar Wilde: 'If you cannot write well, you cannot think well; if you cannot think well, others will do your thinking for you'.

*The assumption that [writing] is . . . essentially a matter of getting clearly in mind what we want to say, and then finding the words which will recall those meanings and make them available to others, is possibly the **single most serious obstacle for most people** all through the composing process.*

Booth, T.Y (1986). 'I. A. Richards and the Composing Process'. *College Composition and Communication*, 37 (4): pp. 453–465.

We need to adopt pedagogical approaches that make writing not just a rehearsal for the workplace, as much as an intellectually rigorous context for engaging students as critical and creative thinkers, for developing their sophisticated intellectual powers.

How does writing effect learning?

1. Writing gives concrete form to our ideas. There's very little mental rehearsal of words themselves before they are written. We find our ideas through writing. E.M. Forster: 'How do I know what I think until I see what I say?' Joan Didion: 'If I had been blessed with even limited access to my own mind, there would have been no reason to write'.
2. Writing requires us to think in a focused way. Writing is a concentrated form of thinking.
3. Writing allows us to move beyond the trivial and immediate to the complex and significant. Experienced writers know that writing is a difficult, complex, time-consuming, frustrating, recursive, unpredictable, but pleasurable process. They draft so they can revise (re-see). They know that it's easier to correct than to create. They are confident that once those words are on the page or on the screen, those words 'will talk to other words'.
4. Re-writing demands an internal monologue on the ideas being considered—about content, structure, phrasing, connections, signposts, inclusions, exclusions, tone, and style.

Writing research has revealed that writing is an amalgam of complex, incremental, iterative processes constrained by a myriad of contextual variables. Writing is not a theory-free collection of formats, formulas, and folklore, but good writing has demonstrable principles and rules. You can teach students promising practices and explicit strategies.

However, we need to acknowledge that producing high-quality academic writing is the biggest challenge facing students entering university.

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he [she] has to invent the university for the occasion—invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like History, or Anthropology, or Economics, or English. He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community.

D. Bartholomae (1985). 'Inventing the University', p. 273, *When a Writer Can't Write*, (ed.) Mike Rose, Guilford Press.

Every discipline has its own system for looking at and organising experience—a perspective on the world that is reflected in its questions, research methods, and the roles its practitioners play. Writing in every discipline is a form of social behaviour in that discipline, so students need to be socialised into the intellectual conventions of their disciplinary and professional discourse communities. Students need to understand academic frameworks and disciplinary conventions. Tertiary students who are regarded as 'poor' writers have probably never done any writing of the kind that universities demand such as analytical-critical reviews of the literature, research papers, reports, etc.

Students need to understand that academic writing and technical writing consist of more than conforming to the formats and styles of a discipline. A discipline is a centre of inquiry rather than a bank of knowledge. To write academically implies the ability to pose questions; read the literature; gather and evaluate data; analyse and assess conflicting interpretations; and produce an effective, well-organised, polished argument.

Academics are writers. Academics are experts in the rhetoric and conventions of their disciplines, and they can help their students to become better writers by drawing on their own expertise as writers in their fields. **Staff who involve themselves in integrating writing into their course content and thereby enhancing the writing of their students invariably find that their students become more deeply engaged with the discipline, they enjoy their teaching more, and students enjoy their learning more.**

Teachers need to help students to de-mystify the specialised language of their discipline: to know how to read text to be able to write it. We want students who can consume and produce text with intelligence and sensitivity.

Students may know how to extract content from a text, but can they identify the strategies that a writer has used to influence readers? Get students to identify and critically examine their responses to a text at the word, sentence, paragraph, and document level. What is the writer doing? How are they doing it and why are they doing it? (A stylistic matrix—see below—will help a student to do this.)

Imagine the kind of writing that you want your students to be able to do, and then design authentic assignments with generative power that might result in such writing. Each disciplinary community has its own forms of writing. Academics within a particular discipline have tacit knowledge of their ‘discourse community’—largely acquired through their own socialisation into the discipline. **Each teacher within the academy is a writer and, inherently, a teacher of writing.**

Questions for academics:

- What kinds of writing are valued in your discipline?
- What is counted as evidence in your discipline?
- What counts as knowledge in your discipline?
- How is new knowledge communicated in your discipline?
- What are the methods for shaping that knowledge?
- What types of logical and inferential thinking are valued in your discipline?
- What are the prevailing conventions of organisation, diction, and formats in your discipline?
- How important is it that students conform to these conventions?
- What kinds of writing are professionals in your discipline required to write?
- What kinds of writing would you like the graduates of your program to be able to produce?
- What skills do students need to be able to produce these kinds of writing?
- What are the main critical thinking and writing problems that your students have?

Guiding principles for staff making writing happen in their courses:

1. *Establish course goals:*

- content (essential concepts, knowledge, and students’ metaknowledge)
- critical thinking processes (reading, questioning, analysing, synthesising, structuring, arguing)

2. *Design critical thinking problems/research questions that focus on these goals:*

- problems should focus on course content and help students learn the ways of thinking, analysing, and arguing of their discipline
- problems should encourage students to question assumptions and to explore alternative ways of thinking and acting
- problems should engage student interest and promote enquiry

3. *Develop a repertoire of ways to give critical thinking/active learning problems:*

As thought-provokers for ‘warm-up’, non-graded writing, that is, thinking aloud on paper, weave regular exploratory tasks that are interesting and relevant into the fabric of the course so that students’ explorations ‘prime the pump’ for class discussions and help students to generate ideas for formal papers or examinations. Explain that what you are looking for is ‘engaged thought’, that is, seeing issues, finding puzzles, confronting inadequate explanations, wading into complexity.

In the first class, give them 10 minutes to free-write, by hand, in response to one of these prompts that will reveal their writing history/their relationship with writing:

- Writing is hard for me because . . .
- Writing is easy for me because . . .
- My experience of high-school English was . . .
- I used to love writing when . . . , but my writing was pulled apart and never put back again.
- What I know about ‘how writing works’

4. *When assigning formal writing, treat writing as **a rhetorical process that respects the relationships between purpose, reader, writer, context, content (substance, structure, and style) and consequences***

- design authentic, **scaffolded** assignments with **explicit instructions** and **excellent exemplars**
- create a context for assignments—purpose (to inform, to persuade, to give instructions, to analyse data, etc.), reader (authentic?), document type (summary of a published paper, lab report, technical report, literature review, academic argument, etc.)
- emphasise initial problem solving, exploration, reflective research
- encourage imperfect first drafts and allow re-writes
- students learn most when allowed to revise and re-submit for an improved grade
- form students into peer-response reading groups to make observations about drafts
- on drafts, write comments that encourage revision and that emphasise ideas/content and organisation/development of argument
- students must learn to find their own sentence-level errors; help them to become their own best editor (*How Writing Works* Chapter 11) Get them to keep a worksheet/style sheet of their corrected errors
- encourage use of student support services for students who have difficulties in producing relatively error-free work

5. *Develop clear assessment criteria and give them to students in advance:*

- encourage them to use the criteria sheet/rubric as a revising-editing checklist

Style-Guide Entry Rubric **Total marks = 15**

Content: Has the writer chosen an interesting point of grammar, writing, or language?

Have they dealt with it in an informative, engaging way that shows they understand their topic?

Excellent	An excellent, informative, engaging entry that relates to a point of grammar, writing, or language.	3 points
Good	An informative, engaging entry that relates to a point of grammar, writing, or language.	2 points
Fair	A fairly informative, engaging entry that relates to a point of grammar, writing, or language.	1 point

Structure: Is this a cohesive (flows easily) and coherent (makes sense and is focused) entry? Does it have an introduction, a middle section, and a conclusion, with transitions between sections?

Excellent	An excellent, cohesive, coherent entry.	3 points
Good	A cohesive, coherent entry.	2 points
Fair	A fairly cohesive, coherent entry.	1 point

Style: Does this entry have an appropriate use of words **for its readership**?

Excellent	An excellent use of words.	3 points
Good	An appropriate use of words.	2 points
Fair	A fairly appropriate use of words.	1 point

Grammar and syntax (sentence structure): Does this entry show an excellent command of grammar, sentence structure, and punctuation?

Excellent	An excellent command of grammar, syntax, and punctuation.	3 points
Good	A good command of grammar, syntax, and punctuation.	2 points
Fair	Some mistakes in grammar and punctuation and problems with syntax.	1 point

Format:

Excellent	An exceptionally well-designed format.	3 points
Good	A well-designed format.	2 points
Fair	A fairly well-designed format.	1 point

Stylistic analysis

Stylistic features	Non-academic writing	Academic/technical writing
Topical content	drawn from everyday experience, current issues	drawn from a narrow, specialised field
	local interest, people's everyday 'commonsense'	discipline-based, systematic knowledge regime
Audience	general	specialised
Reader's prior knowledge of topic	not necessary beyond everyday affairs, 'commonsense'	should have the contextual framework
Writer's role	storyteller, entertainer	expert, teacher
Stance	1 st and/or 2 nd person 3 rd person possible	usually 3 rd person, though 1 st person is becoming increasingly acceptable avoid 2nd person
Writer-reader relationship	personal close identity-based	impersonal distant topic-based
Tone	conversational subjective—gives insight into the writer's personality	formal objective—an impartial perspective on the topic
Humour	common	rare, or very dry
Dramatic elements	used for suspense and emphasis	rarely used
Language	informal, relaxed, accessible	formal, often technical
	colloquialisms	no
	clichés	no
	contractions	no
	abbreviations	no (in parentheses is ok)
	very little jargon—if so, kept simple	technical jargon can be necessary

	grounded, everyday concrete connotative (visually evocative) exaggerated (hyperbole) can be verbose (for effect)	often theoretical more abstract denotative accurate, precise concise, to the point
Sentence structure	fragments common, conversational	fully developed, formal construction
	licence may be taken—rules broken for special effect or emphasis	follow conventions of the genre and the disciplinary field
Structure and paragraphs	narrative, descriptive, or thematic	hierarchical, unified, coherent, logical
	roundabout or teasing introduction	straight to the point, logical progression
	shorter paragraphs—often one sentence	longer, fully developed paragraphs
	flexible approaches possible	topic sentence + elaboration
Title	motivating sensational enigmatic evocative	functional—descriptive of content
Documentation	not necessary, 'name-dropping'?	yes—consistent format citations and bibliography needed

WRITE101x English Grammar and Style**6th offering August 2017**

Grammar is the structural foundation of our ability to express ourselves. The more we are aware of how it works, the more we can monitor the meaning and effectiveness of the way we and others use language. It can help foster precision, detect ambiguity, and exploit the richness of expression available in English. And it can help everyone—not only teachers of English, but teachers of anything, for all teaching is ultimately a matter of getting to grips with meaning.

(David Crystal, *Making Sense of Grammar*. Longman, 2004)

In what ways is writing like cooking?

- You must understand the conventions of recipe-writing
- You must be able to read and analyse a recipe to be able to judge whether it's any good
- You need to be familiar with kitchen practices, cooking operations, and kitchen equipment
- You need to understand the diversity of ingredients that you are working with and the range of outcomes, so that you can make choices and control the process
- You need to understand the variability of ingredients in different conditions (e.g., never attempt to make meringues or chocolate fudge in wet weather)
- You need to use quality ingredients, but they won't guarantee quality output
- You have to prepare carefully and concentrate on the task
- You need to know how to combine ingredients
- You need to create simple dishes before you can orchestrate complex dishes
- You need to know your eaters' tastes so that you can cater for their preferences
- You need to know what your finished dish should look like
- You may need guidance and a bit of hand-holding on a difficult point of technique
- Without regular practice, you won't necessarily succeed
- Following a recipe is a sequential, orderly process, which you can deviate from, but only if you are already an accomplished cook
- With ingenuity and flair, you can go beyond the recipe to enhance the final dish or to create something completely different
- If you make a mess, you have to clean it up.

Some extra points:

G. Graff & C. Birkenstein (2014). *They say/I say: The moves that matter in academic writing* (with 2016 MLA update). WW Norton & Co, New York.

https://theconversation.com/grammarians-rejoice-in-the-10-million-comma-74824#comment_1245329

R. Petelin (2016). *How Writing Works: A Field Guide to Effective Writing*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

Endorsements for the book:

Ewen Wallace, CODE bloke at CAD bloke: Definitely getting this book. As a high-school maths-science geek, I had very little appreciation for words . . . until Roslyn. If this book is even just a fraction as transformative as my days at QUT, then it is a treasure.

'What Roslyn Petelin doesn't know about clear, precise writing isn't worth knowing'.

Leigh Sales, ABC TV

'A superb guide to great writing in the modern media era'.

Phil Harding, journalist and broadcaster, London

'Whether you're a CEO or an intern, the ability to communicate clearly is your biggest asset. Petelin's expert advice in this book will accelerate your career'.

Damian Kington, Global Head of Marketing, Liquidnet, New York

'*How Writing Works* will be an enormous support for undergraduates and postgraduates who want to be the best writers possible. It will also help to prepare them for success in the communication industries, whether as author, editor, publicist, or publisher'.

Jeri Kroll, Professor of English and Creative Writing, Flinders University, Australia

'*How Writing Works* will be invaluable for all students from undergraduate to doctoral level, especially as a guide to the construction of robust and coherent argument'.

Margo Blythman, Former Director of Teaching and Learning, University of the Arts, London

'Good writing and editing require a deep awareness of, and respect for, language. The rich research and illuminating examples demonstrate Petelin's lifelong dedication to understanding and celebrating not only the strictures of English, but its playfulness and fluidity. This is a witty and engaging book for those who love language and want to use it successfully. The further readings and references alone are worth the cost of admission!'

Jodi Simpson, Senior Editor, Laurence King Publishing, London

'It's time for a new President for the Republic of Writing: Petelin's book will win her subjects from students to experienced professionals electing to learn why writing is so vital and to follow her lively learning pathways on how to do it elegantly, vividly, and with precision'.

Professor David McKie, University of Waikato, New Zealand

'Roslyn Petelin is the best of the best in teaching clear, readable writing. Alongside two generations of academics, I learned my craft from the wise and helpful feedback she offered as editor of the *Australian Journal of Communication* from 1988–2013. This book will improve the writing of everyone who reads it'.

Lelia Green, PhD Professor of Communications, School of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University, Perth

Some academics (those who worship a form-content distinction) will never agree that writing is the province of all disciplines.

The proposition that the separation of what someone says from how they say it—content from form, substance from rhetoric, écrit from écriture—is as mischievous in anthropology as it is in poetry, painting, or political oratory (C. Geertz, Works and Lives, p. 27)

