

Writing and Reading: A Joint Journey Through Ideas

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For both learners and teachers, the concepts and conventions involved in learning to write English for academic purposes can sometimes seem daunting in their complexity. They may also hinder learners from finding their own voice. This article proposes a simple model for successful writing based on the metaphor that writing and reading together constitute a joint journey through ideas. A successful writer leads the reader through these ideas, adopting the reader's perspective and providing appropriate signals in the text to guide progress. A teacher who adopts this model may first encourage students (as in all writing) to find their own voice and later to take account of the specific conventions involved in writing for academic purposes.

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INTRODUCTION

For many of us, when we first begin to teach students to write for academic purposes, it is not only a pedagogical venture but also a daunting first encounter with the multitude of concepts and categories that are now used to describe the skills and strategies of effective writing. If we have not done so already, this is when we come to grips seriously with the notion of the “genre.” Underlying this notion is the idea that the academic community – like every other community – produces and evaluates its written texts according to the rules and conventions it has established. As a result, there are numerous types of written text that are recognized as the main “genres” of the academic

community – for example, the research report, the journal article, and the academic essay. In order to equip our students to operate successfully as members of their new community, we must teach them the conventions its members use when they produce the genres that are most important to them. In relation to the academic essay, for example, we need to teach them elements such as

- different styles of argumentation and when they are appropriate,
- how to use topic sentences and to structure paragraphs around them,
- how to avoid making unjustified generalizations and to support those which they do make,
- how to use sources and to cite from them without committing the sin of plagiarism,
- how to state problems,
- how to use logical connectors,
- and so on.

Rinnert (2019) gives a clear analysis of factors that may contribute to the effectiveness of introductions and conclusions in EFL writers' argumentation essays.

Personally, I felt confused at first by the sheer number of elements that were apparently necessary to teach in order to “socialize the student into the academic context” (Silva, 1990, p. 17). More than this, I felt uninspired by the thought that the goal of teaching was merely to teach our students to produce “a more or less conventional response to a particular task type that falls into a recognizable genre” (Silva, 1990, p. 17). Since that time, the volume and scope of relevant research has accumulated, and the relationship between academic writing and wider aspects of socialization and identity development or transformation has been a central concern (Duff, 2010; Farnese et al., 2022; Flowerdew & Wang, 2015).

My initial response may have had something to do with the fact that I myself was inducted into the academic context through works of literature, compared to which the style of much academic writing was, in my perception, somewhat dull and uninspiring. Perhaps it really is necessary to instill the conventions of such writing into lively young minds, but we should think very hard before making such a decision.

A second concern, which was related to the first, was the question

of where this approach to the teaching of writing stood in relation to an issue that permeates all language teaching, namely, the need to balance the creative aspects of language use with the constraints of accuracy and social convention. To me, it seemed that many genre-based approaches set out to impose the external academic voice too early before students had had enough opportunity to create a voice of their own.

A third source of my questioning was my own experience as a writer. Like other writers from the days before genre analysis, I wrote my own books and articles without any conscious awareness of argument structure, topic sentences, or any of the other concepts that we use in order to analyze writing for our students. My own struggles with words had been with simpler, but, it seemed to me, more fundamental problems, such as trying to

- clarify my messages to myself,
- project myself into my potential readers' minds,
- lay out my messages in the clearest, most comprehensible form that I could discover.

Though I was well aware of the limitations of the books I had written, it had become clear through reviews and conversations with teachers that, on the whole, they conveyed their meanings to most readers in a straightforward and accessible way.

WRITING AS AN ACT OF COMMUNICATION

These considerations did not lead me to an outright rejection of approaches to academic writing that emphasized the conventions of recognizable academic genres. Obviously, these conventions form part of the expectations of many people who read our students' texts and, if only for that reason, cannot be ignored in any reader-oriented approach to writing. Equally obviously, the conventions have evolved in order to serve certain purposes for writers and readers. To the extent, therefore, that our students share the same purposes, mastery of the same conventions can help them fulfill their own writing purposes more effectively and understand instances where their writing did not succeed in achieving its effect.

It seemed to me, however, that we needed to go further in

penetrating beneath the conventions of the genre and operating directly at the level of the purposes these conventions serve. In order to do this, we need to present students with a model of writing that is based not on the text-based categories that are used to analyze different academic genres but on a view of writing as an act of communication between the writer and reader. From this model, we can *subsequently* derive an account of how this act of communication is often – though not necessarily – carried out by different strategies in different text-types.

In other words, we need to focus first on the requirements of the act of communication itself and make these requirements the primary source of guidance in our advice about effective writing. The features of the different genres of written English should emerge as consequences. In working with students, we should start from writing as an extended act of communication and work gradually from there towards an awareness of the conventions of different genres – for example, of how a report is typically constructed in an academic context or how arguments are typically presented in an academic essay. Students should then experience these conventions as *motivated responses to the requirements of a particular kind of communication*. They should also be in a position to make principled decisions about whether to accept, adapt, or reject these conventions in their own writing.

In this article, I will present a simple model of writing based on the metaphor of a joint journey through ideas, which I have found useful in helping students and myself to perceive the requirements and characteristics of writing as an act of communication. First, I will look more closely at the notion of “communicative purpose” in relation to academic writing.

PURPOSES OF WRITING

In almost all forms of communication, two sets of purposes are operating simultaneously: pragmatic purposes and social purposes.

Pragmatic Purposes

The first set is concerned with the pragmatic effects of the communication, that is, whether the messages are conveyed effectively and accurately. These purposes are concerned with the necessary

conditions of communication, and it would make little sense to question them, unless a person wishes to be deliberately vague or confusing.

Social Purposes

The second set of purposes is concerned with the social effects of the *form* of the communication, that is, whether the communication conforms to the expectations of a particular social community, for example, in terms of appropriate register and level of formality. These purposes are concerned with conventional features of language use that have emerged within particular communities, and any individual may therefore decide to reject them if they are prepared to accept the social consequences.

To see how these two kinds of purpose are distinct in writing as well as in speaking, we might start by considering a simple written text such as a menu. Whether the menu is standing on the table of a five-star hotel or scribbled on the blackboard in a bar, its pragmatic functions are the same, namely, to inform the clients of (a) what they can eat and drink and (b) how much they have to pay. These common purposes lead to certain common features that ensure that the messages are conveyed effectively and clearly. Thus, each kind of menu must contain, at a minimum, a statement of the available items categorized in some way that will help the readers to locate what they want, accompanied by a statement of the corresponding prices. In other respects, however, there are obvious differences between the two texts. The conventions that operate in a five-star hotel simply do not allow for menus being scribbled on blackboards. The ornate menu of a five-star hotel would seem pretentious in a bar. Each belongs distinctly to its own social context, and they could not be interchanged, unless the writers wished to achieve some special kind of social effect.

If we transfer the discussion now to academic writing, we can distinguish the same two sets of purposes.

- Consideration of the effectiveness and accuracy of their communication requires writers to project themselves into the role of their readers, judge the extent of knowledge that their readers share with them (i.e., both at the start of the text and as it proceeds), structure and conceptualize their messages in an accessible form, and convey them in comprehensible language.

- Consideration of the social effects of their communication requires writers to be aware of the conventional ways in which particular kinds of written text are usually presented in academic contexts. For example, a typical research report is structured in predictable ways and includes sections that review previous work in the domain, establish the purpose of the present research, describe the methods used, set out the results, and discuss their implications.

In helping students to develop their academic writing skills in a second language, it is the first set of factors that are primary, since it is they that are fundamental to the success or failure of writing as communication. To the extent that the second set serve these primary communication needs, they will emerge naturally as outcomes of the first. To the extent that the second set are a matter of social convention within a particular discourse community, they will need to be taught as external constraints. This can only happen, however, after students have mastered the more fundamental processes that lie at the core of written communication.

In developmental terms, then, we need to begin by giving students a model of writing that emphasizes purposes relating to the effective and accurate communication of their ideas. These purposes will of themselves lead towards those conventions of academic writing that were developed in direct response to the requirements of communication. Other conventions can be brought to the students' awareness at a later stage as part of the process of "socialization."

A MODEL AND METAPHOR FOR WRITING IN ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

In this section, I will propose a simple way of looking at writing that is based on the metaphor of a journey the writer and the reader undertake together. More specifically, writing and reading together are seen as a joint journey through a landscape in which both travelers need to know at every point where they are and where they are heading. I have found this metaphor to be clear and meaningful to students. I have also found it useful as an integrating focus for the development of a variety of skills that might otherwise seem disparate. Although the metaphor is intended to serve as a concrete point of reference rather than

as a theoretical account, it can, in fact, be given theoretical underpinning, for example, through schema theory, in which the metaphor of the map is also commonly found.

This metaphor has its primary roots in my own experience as a writer of books and articles. Writing for me has always been a difficult task, and the most difficult task of all has been writing simply. This is because the need to write simply imposes particularly strict constraints in four major domains:

Conceptualization

First, in order to write simply, we have to conceptualize our messages with the maximum possible accuracy and clarity. Ideas and connections that seem clear when we express them in academic jargon can sometimes require a lot more thinking out when the jargon is stripped away, and we have to get down to the essence of what they really mean.

Structuring and Sequencing

Second, we have to structure and sequence the facts and ideas with the maximum possible logical consistency so that the links are clear and the reader has no difficulty in perceiving how we proceed from one point to the next. Again, I have found this constraint to be a hard and often humbling intellectual discipline. On many occasions, the need to express connections in simple terms has made me aware of missing links in my own thinking processes.

Linguistic Creativity

Third, we have to call on the full potential of our linguistic creativity. We need to experiment constantly with alternative ways of expressing the same idea and clarifying connections. We have to be sensitive to any formulation that might be vague or unclear, either in its superficial meaning or in its implications. We have to juggle with words so that readers perceive the structure of each sentence while they are actually reading it without having to backtrack. (Even in the previous sentence, for example, I experimented with the alternatives “in either its superficial meaning or its implications” as against “either in its

superficial meaning or in its implications” – a trivial distinction in itself, but one where one version might be just marginally easier to process than the other.)

Role-Taking

Fourth – and this is the most important and fundamental domain but one all too often neglected – all of the efforts described above will succeed only to the extent that, as writers, we can make an “imaginative leap” into the mind of our readers. This process (sometimes called “role-taking” or “anticipatory decoding”) is crucial in all communications but makes particular demands in writing, since it has to be sustained throughout a long text and without ongoing feedback from the receiver. Writers must be simultaneously a writer and a reader, following the developing shared knowledge in the reader’s mind and never overstepping it. They must take their readers by the hand, predicting their needs and their difficulties at all levels.

The levels at which the process of role-taking has to operate range from lower-level choices of language (e.g., in the last sentence of the previous paragraph, will my reader understand that “their” refers to “readers” rather than “writers,” or should I clarify this?); through middle-level structuring (e.g., am I putting too many subpoints into the present sentence? Should I break it up or use bullet-point form?); to higher-level conceptual connections (e.g., have I made it clear that the “fourth point” in this section is, in a sense, not a separate point at all, but a higher-level condition on which the other three depend? Is there a simple way of making this clearer, without seeming obscure or pedantic?).

The constraints just described lie at the heart of all good writing. The need to write simply makes us become aware of them in especially powerful form.

The second source of the metaphor of writing as a journey through ideas was my experience of walking through the countryside around Hong Kong. As I traveled along the paths, I realized that what I wanted then from my map or from the leader of the group was precisely what my readers wanted from me as they traveled through my text. At any particular moment, we had two fundamental wishes: First, we wanted to be able to orient ourselves, to make sense of the area and the landmarks that we had already reached; second, we wanted to know where we were

going, in relation both to our general direction and to the immediate path before us. If we view writing and reading as a joint journey through ideas, we can see how effective writers serve their readers in similar ways.

First, good writers make their preparations for the trip. They make sure that they understand the journey fully themselves, in terms of both individual places they will visit and the route that links these places. In cognitive terms, they clarify their own schemata, both regarding the overall structure of the route and the landscape, and in terms of the specific objects of their attention. In practice, of course, this clarification continues during the process of writing, as writing forces the writer to re-think and re-visit ideas. The writer may need to explore the landscape several times before the final journey the writer and reader will make together.

Second, good writers seek to understand the minds and capabilities of their fellow travelers. They lead them along routes that are relevant to their needs. They keep themselves aware of what their companions have already seen in the landscape and anticipate what they still wish or need to see. They take account of their companions' capabilities, that is, how fast they can move forward, the kinds of challenge they can face, and so on.

Third, good writers make sure that their readers know where they are and where they are going. At the beginning, they make sure that their readers know enough about the area to be able to orient themselves, and they provide them with enough major signposts to know the general direction of the journey. As they proceed, they ensure that their companions know which specific paths they are to follow and, if necessary, provide localized signposts to show them the exact way.

Fourth, good writers pay attention to the micro-steps that their readers take as they move along the path. This is where the writer takes time deliberating on the appropriate use (or non-use) of such cohesive signals as *therefore*, *however*, *as a result*, and so on. For example, the superficially simple choice between *but* or *and* carries important signals about the attitudinal stance that the reader will adopt towards the information that follows (e.g., is it unusual? or only to be expected?).

CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, many of the features that characterize good academic writing can be explained in simple and coherent ways if we explore the implications of viewing writing as an act of communication rather than as the production of recognizable genres. I have suggested that the metaphor of reading and writing as a joint journey through ideas can help us to link these features conceptually and pedagogically. In particular, it can help students become aware of the basic conditions that they must fulfill in their writing in order to convey their messages clearly and effectively. On this foundation, they can seek to express their own voice in their writing.

This approach does not exclude making students aware of the genre-specific conventions surrounding the production of academic written English. Many of these conventions will enter students' awareness as natural outcomes of their attempts to communicate complex messages clearly in writing. Others may need to be taught as more or less arbitrary conventions that the academic community has come to adopt. In either case, an awareness of them is an essential factor in enabling students to fulfill the second set of purposes described earlier, namely, those that relate to the social effects of their communication. Priority, however, needs to go to the fundamental requirements of writing as an extended act of communication between the writer and reader.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The extended metaphor of writing and reading as a 'joint journey through ideas' was first used in a paper that I presented at a RELC Symposium in Singapore in 1995 (Littlewood, 1995). The original paper is no longer available; this is a revised and updated version.

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