

“Write Like an Academic”¹
By Patricia R. Taylor

What is Academic Writing?

Outside of the academy itself, the descriptor “academic” rarely piques interest for readers. Too many associate it with jargon-laden phrases and ideas devoid of connection to the “real” world. But for those in institutions of higher learning, the term means something quite different. As a teacher of academic writing at various universities, I have spent a great deal of time helping students identify, practice, and define the features of good academic writing. When I ask my students to reflect on what makes a good essay, they often talk about thesis statements, paragraph development, transitions, evidence, style, and myriads of other writing features. None of these answers is wrong: they are essential, and we cover them all in class. Yet if this is the complete list at the end of the semester, it means something has gone wrong, because it misses or oversimplifies the key features of academic writing. Academic writing is defined by clearly stated positions, evidence-guided analysis, and careful consideration of alternative understandings. But academics value the kinds of writing we do for reasons that are less about the *features* of our writing than the *processes* and *contexts* from which they develop. That is, we value the process of developing new ideas in ways that are only possible through writing, and we see academic writing as a communal conversation that serves as the foundation for all our work.

It is worth pausing here to discuss two related, but not identical, terms that are sometimes used to describe this kind of writing: “opinion” and “argument.” I use “academic” and “argumentative” nearly interchangeably, but I find that “opinion” often misdirects students in the classroom. At least in the United States, students largely perceive opinion as subjective: it does not always need to be supported by evidence so much as by feeling and, as such, it cannot be reasonably challenged. These assumptions obscure that academics mean “opinion” in the sense of reasoned judgements and conclusions based on evidence, much like the “opinion” from a judicial bench.

Instead of opinion, “argument” is a better term: it emphasizes that writers have their own perspective, judgement, or stance on an issue, but these are supported with reasoning and evidence and are not merely subjective. However, students still sometimes come in with assumptions that can get in the way, thinking of argument as pro-con debate or even more stringent verbal conflict. I often show Monty Python’s “Argument Clinic” to help students think through the difference between argument and contradiction. Academic writing is argumentative, but it is not always agonistic—in fact, it can even be collaborative.

The Writing Process

Students often treat academic or argumentative essays as if the purpose is to demonstrate pre-existing understanding. They think of essays as proof that they’ve learned something, but the learning happened before the writing. This is an understandable perspective, as too often that’s exactly what teachers ask for: the regurgitation of information gleaned from lectures, reading, or discussion to prove that it has been rigorously synthesized into the student’s mind.

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However, academic writing does not merely demonstrate understanding. While understanding is hopefully one of the final outcomes, the product is only possible because of the process: we *develop* understanding through the process of writing. The Council of Writing Program Administrators’s “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing” describes numerous habits of mind that are essential for academic writing. The first three are:

- Curiosity - the desire to know more about the world.
- Openness - the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.
- Engagement - a sense of investment and involvement in learning.²

All three are related to this principle that writing is not meant merely to reflect one’s current beliefs, but to be a part of the process of learning. Curiosity, openness, and engagement are postures and habits that do not merely precede writing, but are also a part of it.

But if we develop understanding as we go along rather than only writing about what we already understand, we must assume that there will be failures along the way. If we are curious about things that have not already been fully examined by others, there will inevitably be moments where we get things wrong. If we are genuinely trying to create new knowledge, “new ways of being and thinking in the world,” we will get things wrong. Hopefully these errors are discovered along the way—but sometimes they will only appear long after we have finished with a project. Academic writing assumes that failures will happen, so we make review and revision an essential part of what we do. The goal is to make our failures as productive as possible by being open to criticism and changing our minds.

At every school where I have taught academic writing, my students arrive with the assumption that their first step in writing an academic paper will be to propose a thesis. But academic writing almost always starts with a combination of observation and questioning—that is, curiosity. One of my own past projects began when I noticed that there were a significant number of references to writing in blood in the work of a seventeenth-century English poet, George Herbert. Why was that such an important image? There wasn’t an immediately obvious answer, which was what made the question so valuable. Another came when I realized that my favorite science fiction series had numerous tiny allusions to Shakespeare: the lead character quotes *Richard III* when meeting the woman who becomes his wife, his mother is named Cordelia, his clone compares himself to Caliban.³ There was a niggling feeling in the back of my mind that these references were significant, but I wasn’t yet sure exactly why or how. Clearly the author had a love for Shakespeare, but love alone did not seem to tell me why those references appeared at those moments. Was there a pattern and what might it mean?

Such questions guide inquiry outside of the field of literature, too, especially (though by no means exclusively) in the liberal arts and sciences. While literary scholars like myself ask these questions of texts, historians ask these questions of the past; sociologists ask them of societies; psychologists ask them of the human mind; biologists ask them of plants and animals and cells and genes; astronomers ask them of stars and planets and black holes. There is no end to the questions that academics ask.

My assignments to students at all levels, then, asks them to start not with a thesis, but with a serious, debatable question, one that might produce multiple possible right answers—one that leaves room for the possibility of failure and being wrong. The question thus usually goes

² Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and The National Writing Project, “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing” (CWPA, NCTE & NWP, January 2011), http://wpacouncil.org/aws/CWPA/pt/sd/news_article/242845/_PARENT/layout_details/false.

³ For those who are interested, the series is Lois McMaster Bujold’s *Vorkosigan Saga*.

beyond *what* is happening to *why* or *how* it is happening, as the why and how can rarely be answered by straight-forward facts. To start with a thesis rather than one of these more complex questions often leads to cherry-picking evidence that supports the pre-determined idea, excessive confirmation bias, and other similarly reductive approaches. It assumes that an idea is right before the thinking has even begun. By starting with a question, we create the opportunity for students to truly practice curiosity, openness, and engagement, and for them to see their process as containing room for both productive failure and eventual success.

Once we have our question, writing becomes a powerful tool for thinking through the questions and the evidence. With my own projects, I had data points, but they had to be interpreted. Sometimes I had ideas and explanations for individual references but putting them into a cohesive whole was more difficult because holding all of the information in my head and reasoning through it all at once was nearly impossible. Without writing, I would simply talk and think myself in circles trying to figure things out. I could discuss the data with colleagues or students, but it's rare that such discussion alone manages to take the most complex and difficult questions all the way to complete, complex answers. Writing, however, was a way I could externalize my thinking so it could be examined, manipulated, and revised on the page.

Indeed, many academics have a writing process dominated by tools that help us use writing as a way to physically manipulate our ideas as if they were objects. Freewriting, outlines, note cards, mind-mapping, sentences, paragraphs, and drafts are all about constructing units of thought that can be extracted, moved around, reconfigured, re-seen, and refined. In his article "Magic Words: How Language Augments Human Computation," philosopher Andy Clark argues that these forms of writing are ways we make ourselves capable of thinking things we wouldn't have been able to before. He describes his writing process as part of his argument:

As I construct this chapter, for example, I am continually creating, putting aside, and re-organizing chunks of text. I have a file which contains all kinds of hints and fragments, stored up over a long period time, which may be germane to the discussion. I have source texts and papers full of notes and annotations. As I (literally, physically) move these things about, interacting first with one, then another, making new notes, annotations and plans, so the intellectual shape of the chapter grows and solidifies. It is a shape that does not spring fully developed from inner cogitations. Instead, it is the product of a sustained and iterated sequence of interactions between my brain and a variety of external props.⁴

The props that are best might depend on each person or project, but almost all academic writers have them; in fact, I only say "almost all" because, like any true academic, I'm cautious about absolutes. But writing is a way of externalizing thinking precisely so it can be manipulated, set aside, brought back in, and reconsidered.

By the end of this writing-and-thinking process, academic writers aim to have an answer to the question they started with—that is, a thesis. When thinking our way to the answer is externalized in writing, we also have a record of the evidence, analysis, and process that we can shape into something meant to be understood by others. One of the final characteristics of the academic writing process, then, becomes importance of review and revision.

Review is especially important for the most professional level of academic writing, where we engage in specialized peer review by other experts. Beyond the credibility such review

⁴ Andy Clark, "Magic Words: How Language Augments Human Computation," in *Language and Thought: Interdisciplinary Themes*, ed. Jill Boucher and Peter Carruthers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 162–83, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511597909.011>.

provides, peer review also offers us a way to avoid getting caught up in our own heads and prevents us from remaining blind to our own failures. While externalizing our ideas and thoughts on paper makes it easier for us to see problems with our thinking—see our failures—it does not solve the problem entirely. Instead, we rely on sharing our writing with others who are willing to be honest and critical, pointing out flaws in our thinking that we might not otherwise see.

When I was an undergraduate, I was lucky that I had a long-time friend at another university with whom I could share my writing. We sent paragraphs and drafts back and forth, pushing one another to think more deeply and write more clearly. Our writing relationship actually continued much of the way through grad school. Eventually, as the work both of us were engaged in became more specialized, we turned to colleagues and friends who could better see the flaws because they shared our expertise more directly. Having those outside perspectives and someone I could trust to challenge me was incredibly valuable.

However, constructive criticism is something one has to learn to both give and receive. It does not usually come naturally. One of my most difficult tasks as a teacher of academic writing has been to help my students learn to give such critical feedback, largely because of common assumptions about what peer review is. First, students often perceive receiving criticism as painful or giving it as being unkind. For many, to point out someone else's failures to their face is rude! To address this, I've taken to quoting from a fantasy novel, *The Curse of Chalion*. In it, the main character, Cazaril, has just become tutor to a member of the royal family who is *appalled* to find herself receiving some harsh criticism. When she points out that no one else ever dared to point out her flaws, and instead told her how wonderful her work was, Cazaril replies, "If you desire a man to tell you comfortable lies about your prowess, and so fetter any hope of true excellence, I'm sure you may find one anywhere. Not all prisons are made of iron bars. Some are made of feather beds."⁵ The point Cazaril makes is that complimenting someone on their not-so-good work is easy and may feel nice, but it does them a disservice and may actually hurt them. It imprisons them by keeping them from improving; it prevents them from ever becoming truly excellent. By reframing the *absence* of criticism as harm and the *presence* of criticism as freedom, students are challenged to avoid favoring a veneer of niceness over painful-yet-helpful criticisms. The discomfort of criticism and confronting one's failures becomes worth it when one can then improve.

Second, students often have to be redirected from editing each other's work to helping one another revise. Revision is about *seeing again*, hopefully in a way that goes beyond the surface elements of syntax and grammar, and as a result academic peer review rarely focuses on editing unless the issue is affecting clarity and communication. The most formal version of academic peer review is the letter written to the editor of a journal or publishing press, with the author of the article as a secondary audience. The letter describes the shape of the argument, its strengths, its weaknesses, and what it offers (or fails to offer) to potential readers. Along the way, the reviewer provides suggestions for revision that might include cuts, additions, recontextualizations, restructuring, and so on. Often they point out alternative ways of interpreting evidence, perspectives that might not have been considered.

Because it is a letter rather than merely notes on a manuscript, the reviewer must explain the reasoning behind their suggestions. When students are asked to write such letters, this is what they see as valuable as well; as one of my former students put it, "in this more structured and lengthy form, people tend to reveal the thought process behind the edits they are suggesting, which is often just as if not more helpful than the edits themselves." While the student might be

⁵ Lois McMaster Bujold, *The Curse of Chalion* (New York: Harper Torch, 2001), 58.

using the language of “edits,” they are actually referring to much larger structural and revision-level changes. Revision is about the real work of addressing one’s failures in thinking, not merely in typing and proofreading.

Much of the academic writing process is flexible and recursive. It assumes that failure will be a necessary component: while there is a general order to these things, at any point a failure might cause us to return to an earlier step and begin again. On more than one occasion, my own projects have started with one question but ended up addressing another, often because of the insightful comments of a friend or colleague pointed me to something I had missed or never considered. My arguments and evidence shift and become more interesting as I make new realizations in the process of writing and rewriting. Curiosity, openness, and engagement are possible precisely because I value the process, just as the process improves when I am genuinely curious, open, and engaged. It can be difficult to replicate that attitude in the classroom simply because of the structures of deadlines, grades, institutions, and the stakes of it all, but a focus on process surely helps.

Writing as Conversation

The other major element that defines academic and argumentative writing is the idea of writing as conversation. Literary theorist and philosopher Kenneth Burke provides what has long since become the standard metaphor for this conversation:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.⁶

This metaphor might apply to far more than either academic or argumentative writing—I would say that it characterizes various forms of creative writing as well—but it is especially crucial to academic writing. I use this metaphor with students to start a conversation of our own about academic writing; indeed, Burke becomes one of those voices engaged in a heated discussion that we must come to terms with as we put our own oar in.

The metaphor of the parlor conversation offers a number of valuable ways to think about the nature of this kind of writing. First, good argumentative writing requires listening and reading. There are conversations happening all around us, oftentimes that have been going on for centuries and even millennia. Our own ideas and writing will be richer, more nuanced, more complex if we can contextualize them in relationship to other speakers, writers, and their ideas. This is one of the purposes of research, particular what is called the “literature review,” which is sometimes even a special section in an academic paper: it surveys the conversation, identifying common features and groupings among the participants. Burke is right that we may not ever be

⁶ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (University of California Press, 1974), 110–11.

able to “retrace . . . all the steps that had gone before,” but identifying key threads and current voices, then understanding how they fit together, can come close.

Second, in order to enter into the conversation, we must identify its ebbs and flows, both the literal and figurative gaps in what is being said, in order to “put in [our] oar.” When we find a gap, we may find the right moment where we can offer something to the conversation. They can identify what others need to hear and when they need to hear it. Ancient rhetoricians called this *Kairos*, or the appropriateness of speech to the moment. Sometimes the appropriateness is about how we frame our writing (a reference to the time and feeling of the audience), but sometimes it is about how what we have to say matches the moment in time when others need to hear it. The skill of identifying gaps in what is being said is perhaps one of the hardest elements to teach, but when students master it, it becomes one of the most empowering: it assumes that students have unique perspectives that they can use to address the gaps.

Third, conversations don’t work very well if the participants just keep repeating what has already been said, or if we simply reject other people’s ideas. Monty Python’s “Argument Clinic” models why simple rejection or contradiction doesn’t work; a conversation that repeats the same idea over and over without anything new is equally perverse. We must aim to add something new without simply saying that everything that has come before is wrong. As Joseph Harris, author of *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*, puts it, conversations are best when we are “generous” by acknowledging the strengths of what others have said, yet “assertive” in putting forth new ideas, even (or especially) if they might run counter to what others have to say.⁷

Fourth, inherent in any idea of conversation is the fact that we are speaking to other people: we have an audience. We are speaking to those who are part of the conversation in the parlor, either those that are still there or those who might come after us. Academic writing generally assumes an audience of experts, or at least those with enough training to follow a complex argument. They are engaged and interested, either in the subject matter for its own sake or in the implications for their own work, or in the implications for the rest of the world. If we wish for them to consider and respect what we have to say, we must consider and respect them as well.

Fifth, and finally, the goal of making an argument is not to end the conversation but to continue it. While a person may step out of the parlor and the conversation, the conversation itself goes on. Whether we stay in or leave the conversation, we do not write to have the final word but to push the conversation in new directions. Indeed, the best academic writing often notes the limits of its own argument, and where others might take up the threads and develop more new ideas and applications.

So What?

To teach like an academic writer is to value the process and context of developing ideas, perspectives, and arguments as much as the final product. We should aim to:

- Leave space for productive failures, rather than punishing students for taking risks with their ideas;
- Help students ask hard questions that might not have easy answers;

⁷ Joseph Harris, *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts, Second Edition*, Second edition (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2017), 1.

- Think of pieces of writing as objects in the real world to be examined, played with, rearranged, and changed;
- Help students see themselves as participants in a conversation—one in which the audience cares about what they have to say, and they reciprocate;
- Create room for students to learn to give and receive feedback.

If we do this, we will help students develop a voice *and* a way of thinking they might not achieve otherwise.