

Academic writing: how to stay afloat

Early career academics can be left to sink or swim when navigating the choppy waters of learning scholarly writing. Helen Sword says a more formal, communal approach can help everyone, especially women

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By [Helen Sword \(/author/helen-sword\)](#)



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How do successful academics write, and how do they learn to write? What are their daily routines, their formative experiences, their habits of mind? What emotions do they associate with their academic writing? And where do they find the “air and light and time and space”, as the poet Charles Bukowski put it, to get their writing done? These were among the questions that I asked as part of a research project that eventually

took me to 45 universities in 15 countries.

Feedback from more than 1,300 academics, PhD students and other researchers from across the disciplines revealed that successful writing is built on a complex and varied set of attitudes and attributes, including behavioural habits of discipline and persistence, artisanal habits of craftsmanship and care, social habits of collegiality and collaboration and emotional habits of positivity and pleasure.



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However, the abundant how-to literature on scholarly productivity focuses mainly on behaviour and craft: when to write; where to write; how long to write at a stretch; how to compose strong sentences or structure a persuasive argument. Much less frequently addressed are the social and emotional dimensions of academic writing: for whom do we write, and why? How is our writing supported by the various communities we belong to, and how might we better support the writing of others? How can we learn to overcome inhibiting negative feelings of anxiety, frustration and fear, and to draw strength from positive feelings such as passion, pleasure and pride?

Not that it really matters what the writing guides say: most academics don't read them. Nearly half my survey respondents confessed – some abashedly, some brashly – that they have never so much as attended a writing workshop or cracked open a book on grammar and style. Only 15 per cent learned to write and publish in their discipline via an accredited course or its equivalent. For many higher education professionals, it seems, a lack of higher education in academic writing is practically a point of pride.

Of course, all academics have *learned* to write somehow. Through an improvisatory process frequently described by my respondents as “sink or swim”, we figure out how to navigate the swells and eddies of the publication process; how to stay within the lanes of our disciplinary conventions; how to negotiate the shark-infested waters of peer review.

Some of us have even been lucky enough to encounter supervisors or mentors who accelerated our transition from flailing survival to confident freestyling. Informal instruction, however, is a notoriously capricious form of education, unpredictable in its delivery and serendipitous in its outcomes. Senior academics who impart their own tricks of the trade to students and colleagues don't always realise that what worked for them might not necessarily work for everyone. If your only tuition in academic writing came from your doctoral supervisor, chances are you were taught to write *like* your supervisor, rather than being exposed to a wide variety of disciplinary styles and ways of working.

Paddling up and down the PhD lap pool won't prepare you for ocean swimming. Nonetheless, at most universities worldwide, doctoral students are offered little or no formal training in the writing-related skills that they will need as academics or full-time researchers. Most academic English courses are aimed at non-native speakers and concentrate on stylistic conventions and grammar. Postgraduate research methodology courses, meanwhile, focus mainly on research design, only rarely addressing topics such as developing and maintaining productive work habits, avoiding the seductions of disciplinary jargon, working effectively with co-authors or responding constructively to critical feedback.

Post-PhD, even these tenuous lifelines are pulled away. Only a smattering of universities offer continuing professional development programmes for academics in their capacity as research writers, beyond the occasional grant-writing workshop or weekend writing retreat. Where such programmes do exist, moreover, they have often been spearheaded by a single visionary staff member with a particular interest in academic writing. When that person moves to a new position or retires, the programme is likely to disappear.

In the 1980s and 1990s, university administrators woke up to the fact that they were doing little or nothing to support the professional development of academics in their roles as teachers – a gap that, in turn, affected the quality of their students' education. It would now be almost unthinkable for a major higher education institution not to provide some form of professional development in tertiary teaching. As universities face growing pressure to attract contestable research funding, recruit talented international postgraduates and boost their world rankings, what will it take for us to start better preparing academics for their roles as research writers? And how might we replace our current sink-or-swim approach with the kind of ongoing, on-the-job support and development that professionals in fields such as law, medicine and engineering regard as a natural part of their career progression?

We could start by acknowledging that subject expertise does not necessarily equal expertise in writing and communication. Likewise, craft expertise does not necessarily guarantee a nuanced understanding of the many other factors that underpin academic labour. Just because you know how to write elegant prose doesn't mean that you know how to maintain productive work habits, collaborate effectively with other writers or respond gracefully to a bruising referee's report. Nor does craft proficiency guarantee that you possess the vocabulary, confidence and skill to teach good writing to others.

Successful academics who think they have nothing to learn about writing are like champion swimmers who refuse coaching because they already know how to swim. They have what Stanford University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/stanford-university>) psychologist Carol Dweck calls a "fixed mindset" – a mode of thinking that enshrines the status quo – as opposed to a "growth mindset", which welcomes challenge and change.

In their 2005 book *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution*, Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd note that humans are culturally programmed to "imitate the common type"; we acquire new skills mainly by observing those around us and doing as they do. Like any other form of higher education, continuing professional development moves us beyond this default mode by equipping us with the confidence and skill to challenge preconceptions, try out new approaches and extend our knowledge in new directions.

So what might an expert-facilitated, research-informed course in academic writing and research productivity look like?

For a start, it would be designed and taught by accomplished scholars familiar with the current literature on research writing and productivity – in the same way that university teaching certificates are taught by colleagues familiar with the current literature on student learning and higher education pedagogy.

It would be hands-on, iterative and practice-focused. You won't become a competent swimmer just by reading a book.

It would be interdisciplinary and cohort-based, bringing together researchers from across a range of fields to learn with and from each other.

It would encourage productive writing habits and foster strategic career development.

Most importantly of all, it would equip early career and experienced academics alike with the confidence and courage to question received knowledge, push back against disciplinary conventions and remain resilient in the face of criticism and rejection. Trained ocean swimmers know how to recover from rogue waves and cut across riptides that could otherwise drag them helplessly out to sea.



Source: Getty

Ideally, a comprehensive writing development course would also attend to differences in participants' backgrounds and ways of learning. In particular, it would address head-on the gendered nature of academic labour and career progression.

For instance, one of the most startling findings of my research was that male academics are significantly less likely than their female colleagues to attend voluntary workshops, courses or retreats that focus on academic writing and productivity. In fact, I can now walk into an academic writing workshop just about anywhere in Europe, North America or Australasia and confidently predict that about two-thirds of the participants will be women. The only notable exception occurred at a scholarly conference where my presentation was billed as a "keynote address" rather than a writing workshop; there, the men outnumbered the women.

My research suggests several possible reasons for this phenomenon. Mixed emotions about writing, I found, are common to men and women alike: about 70 per cent of my survey respondents across a range of demographic categories (age, career level, gender, discipline, language background and country of origin) reported that they associate both positive and negative emotions with their academic writing. At the margins of the data, however, a somewhat different picture emerged. At every academic career stage from PhD student to full professor, the female academics in my survey expressed higher percentages of negative-only emotions and lower percentages of positive-only emotions than their male counterparts.

Particularly striking was the emotion gap between female and male PhD students. The women in this cohort proved nearly three times more likely than the men to report wholly negative feelings about their writing, a finding that confirms the anecdotal experiences of many a doctoral supervisor.

Journalists Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, co-authors of *The Confidence Code: The Science of Getting More*, cite studies demonstrating that highly confident people, especially men, tend to overestimate their own abilities, whereas less confident people, especially women, tend to underestimate them. But while women who attend academic writing workshops may well be less confident about writing than their male colleagues, they are arguably *more* confident about publicly seeking help.

My husband, a former academic, has a different theory. Men, he tells me, “don’t like being bossed around by women, especially in professional development workshops where there are lots of touchy-feely activities that they can’t see any point in”.

While I rather hope that my own practice-focused, evidence-based workshops would not be described in quite those terms, I understand what he means. We know from a variety of contexts – business, politics, schools – that men and women tend to operate differently in a range of social situations; those differences, in turn, inflect their relative performance and success. People who prefer a “feminine” mode of interacting often have trouble flourishing in a “masculine” environment, and vice versa.

Many academic men are comfortable operating as hunters (moving independently or in alpha-male-led packs, impatient to get going, ready to move in quickly on their quarry), while academic women more typically function as gatherers (working collaboratively, gleaning information bit by bit, taking risks only when they feel ready to do so). It is therefore easy to see why the collaborative, contemplative space of a writing workshop or a residential retreat might suit women better than men. Such spaces offer calm in the storm, an opportunity for rest and renewal. But in the gendered world of academe, where men occupy the vast majority of senior administrative positions, female-friendly initiatives like these may be less likely to get funded than, say, research seminars that focus on a more combative, “masculine” model of scholarship.

Gendered attitudes toward writing can also have broader career implications, particularly when it comes to surviving the peer review process. When asked how they respond to criticism and rejection, the successful academics I interviewed – men and women alike – described themselves as feeling *wounded, stung, thrashed, pierced, burned, shocked, beaten up, crushed, whacked, gutted, knocked back, trampled* and *pissed on from a great height*: images of pain and humiliation that bear no hint of redemption or pleasure.

Are women more likely than men to retreat from such perilous waters to safer shores? In the context of academic writing and publication, is “sink or swim” synonymous with “fight or flight”?

Professional development courses for academic writers won’t necessarily answer these questions or resolve the underlying issues. However, wouldn’t it be preferable for universities to support early career academics with lifebuoys and diving platforms, rather than arming them with spearguns – or, worse yet, simply watching them drown?

Helen Sword is professor and director of the Centre for Learning and Research in Higher Education at the University of Auckland (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-auckland>) and is author of *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write* (<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674737709>) (2017).

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READER'S COMMENTS (3)

#1 (/comment/19092#comment-19092) Submitted by telemarkjo on July 20, 2017 - 2:10pm

Agreed. This is very similar to the finding I gathered developing the Researcher Connect suite of researcher professional development modules for the British Council about 4 years ago. And why we built the core module around the 'who' and 'why' of writing, with more on the politics, tactics and strategies of getting a foothold in a competitive world where N American data and journals hold court (we left most of the technical writing tips to the gazillion and one existing providers). We were pretty proud that the government (through Newton Funds) would role this type of service out to partners across the globe, and assumed that the UK's own needs would also be met. Now working within a UK HEI it's very apparent that their are big gaps in support and I'm penalised for wanting to work and write collaboratively drawing on the richness and strength of many voices.

reply (/comment/reply/626274/19092)

#2 (/comment/19185#comment-19185) Submitted by coraifeartaigh on July 22, 2017 - 2:22pm

Interesting article. I think one point that could have been explored more is that a great many academics learn to write, not primarily from a supervisor or colleagues, but simply from constant reading of the literature in their field. Thus, the statement "You won't become a competent swimmer just by reading a book" is a little irrelevant. Surely the real question is whether one can become a competent writer just by reading..and I think many tutors would argue that this is indeed possible. Of course, the downside is that, in a given field, a particular style of writing tends to become ever more prevalent..

reply (/comment/reply/626274/19185)

#3 (/comment/19272#comment-19272) Submitted by castorlau on July 25, 2017 - 4:31am

While I personally think the article put a little more effort into the male-female analysis than is necessary, it brings up a good point. There are differences in behaviour between genders. In fact, there are bound to be multiple differences in behaviour in any given population, gender is just one way of differentiating broadly. The point is that by considering the differences and providing support as evenly as possible across the spectrum, we can provide more people with a fair chance to reach their potential in a given area of expertise.

That said, I feel this article is less about how academics write, and more about how they survive and prosper in the profession. Well, what about other professions? Are academics the only ones with this issue? Does it only occur with writing? I haven't done the research, but it might be something relevant and worth exploring, especially as similar issues with gender can be expected in other professions.

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