CHAPTER NINETEEN

Researching Writing

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Writing is fundamental to modern societies and is of overarching significance in all our lives: central to our personal experiences, life chances and social identities. Its complex, multifaceted nature, however, is difficult to pin down and as a result, many research approaches have emerged to help clarify both how writing works and the purposes it is employed to achieve. Research, in fact, has taken philosophical, historical, empirical and critical directions and encompassed a wide range of different interpretive and quantitative methods. I briefly summarize and evaluate some of these and illustrate one through a sample study.

Assumptions, writing and research

First of all, it is important to recognize that writing research does not simply involve fitting suitable methods to particular questions. Methods are inseparable from theories and how we understand writing itself. For some people, writing is a product, an artefact of activity which can be studied independently of users by counting features and inferring rules. For others, it is a kind of cognitive performance which can be modelled by analogy with computer processing through observation and writers' on-task verbal reports. A third group sees it as the ways we make our social worlds and explore how writing connects us with readers and institutions in particular contexts. Different methods tell us different things about writing, but they always start with our preconceptions. Simplifying a complex picture, it is

possible to group research methods according to their principal focus and whether they are concerned with illuminating our understanding of texts, writers or readers.

Text-oriented research

This views writing as an outcome of activity as words on a page or screen and can be descriptive (revealing what occurs), analytical (interpreting why it occurs) or critical (questioning the social relations which underlie and are reproduced by what occurs). Texts can also be examined in a variety of ways, looking at particular features or their themes, cohesive elements or move structures. We can examine a text in isolation or as a sample from a single genre, time period or writer, and we can collect a number of texts together as a corpus and aggregate those features as representative of other texts.

Traditionally, research into texts followed views inherited from structuralism and implicit in the Transformational Grammar of Noam Chomsky. Texts were seen as *langue* or a demonstration of the writer's knowledge of forms and grammatical rules rather than attempts to communicate, and methods were the means of revealing principles of writing independent of any actual contexts or users. From this perspective, writing improvement is measured by counting increases in features seen as important to successful writing and calculating the 'syntactic complexity' of texts by counting the number of words or clauses per T-unit and the number of T-units per sentence. There is, however, little evidence to show that syntactic complexity or grammatical accuracy are either the principal features of writing development or the best measures of good writing. Essentially, viewing texts in this way ignores their role as communicative acts and how they function as a writer's response to a particular communicative setting. Because all texts include what writers suppose their readers will know and how they will use the text, no text can be fully explicit or universally 'appropriate'. Rather, they need to balance what needs to be said against what can be assumed.

Writer-oriented research

This emphasizes the actions of writers rather than the features of texts. Champions of this approach believe that writing constitutes a process, or at least a complex of activities, from which all writing emerges and that this is generalizable across contexts of writing. Interest here is on what good writers do when they write, principally so that these strategies can be taught to students. Early work assumed that writing is more of a problem-solving activity than an act of communication and drew on the tools and models

of cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence to reveal how people engage in a writing task to create and revise personal meanings. More recent work has given greater emphasis to the actual performance of writing in a particular context, exploring what Nystrand (1987) calls the *situation of expression*, to investigate the personal and social histories of individual writers as they write in specific contexts.

The goal is to describe the influence of this context on the ways writers represent their purposes in the kind of writing that is produced. As Prior (1998, p. xi) observes:

> Actually writing happens in moments that are richly equipped with tools (material and semiotic) and populated with others (past, present, and future). When seen as situated activity, writing does not stand alone as the discrete act of a writer, but emerges as a confluence of many streams of activity: reading, talking, observing, acting, making, thinking, and feeling as well as transcribing words on paper.

By using detailed observations of acts of writing, participant interviews, analyses of surrounding practices, and other techniques, researchers seek to develop more complete accounts of local writing contexts.

A range of methods have been employed to explore and elaborate the com posing process, moving beyond text analysis to the qualitative methods of the human and social sciences. Case study research has been particularly productive, focusing on 'natural scenes' rather than on experimental environments and often seeking to describe writing from an *emic* perspective, privileging the views of insiders or those participating in a situation. These studies have thus made considerable use of 'think-aloud protocols', or writers' verbal reports while composing (e.g. Smagorinsky 1994), retrospective interviews (e.g. Nelson & Carson 1998) and task observation (e.g. Bosher 1998), sometimes involving keystroke recording during composing (e.g. Sullivan & Lindgren 2006). Often research is longitudinal, following students over an extended period (e.g. Hyland 1998) and uses multiple techniques which may include recall protocols and analyses of several drafts.

However, while these descriptions give significant attention to the experiences of writers and to their understandings of the local features of the context they deal with as they write, concentrating on the local setting fails to capture the culture and event within which the action is embedded and which their writing must invoke. Texts do not function communicatively at the time they are composed but when they are read, as they anticipate particular readers and the responses of those readers to what is written. Texts evoke a social milieu which intrudes upon the writer and activates specific responses to recurring tasks and as a result most current writing research takes a more reader-oriented view to explore the ways writers see their audience and engage in cultural contexts.

Reader-oriented research

This looks beyond individual writers and the surface structures of products to see texts as examples of *discourse* or language in use. Discourse approaches recognize that texts are always a response to a particular communicative setting and seek to reveal the purposes and functions which linguistic forms serve in texts. Here, texts are not isolated examples of competence but the concrete expressions of social purposes, intended for particular audiences. The writer is seen as having certain goals and intentions, certain relationships to his or her readers and certain information to convey, and the forms a text takes are resources used to accomplish these. Writing is therefore seen as mediated by the institutions and cultures in which it occurs and every text is embedded in wider social practices which carry assumptions about writer-reader relationships and how these should be structured. These factors draw the analyst into a wider paradigm which locates texts in a world of communicative purposes, institutional power and social action, identifying the ways that texts actually work as communication.

One way writers are able to construct an audience is by drawing on their own knowledge of other texts and by exploiting readers' abilities to recognize intertextuality between texts. This perspective owes its origins to Bakhtin's (1986) view that language is fundamentally dialogic, that a conversation between writer and reader is an ongoing activity. Writing reflects traces of its social uses because it is multiply linked and aligned with other texts upon which it builds and which it anticipates. 'Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known and somehow takes them into account' (Bakhtin 1986, p. 91). A key idea here is that of *genre*, a term for grouping texts together and referring to the repertoire of linguistic responses writers are able to call on to communicate in familiar situations. Genre reminds us that when we write, we follow conventions for organizing messages because we want our readers to recognize our purposes. Research into genres therefore seeks to show how language forms work as resources for accomplishing goals, describing the stages which help writers to set out their thoughts in ways readers can easily follow and identifying salient features of texts which allow them to engage effectively with their readers (e.g. Hyland 2008).

An overview of methods

While I have divided methods up according to the paradigms with which they are mainly associated, much writing research combines several methods, often both quantitative and qualitative, to gain a more complete picture of a complex reality. In fact, the concept of *triangulation*, or the use of multiple sources of data or approaches, can bring greater plausibility

to the interpretation of results. It obviously makes sense to view research pragmatically, adopting whatever tools seem most effective and a researcher may, for example, gather student opinions about their writing practices through a questionnaire and supplement this with interview or diary data, and with the drafts of their essays, mixing methods to increase the validity of the eventual findings.

Another feature of writing research is that it tends to favour data gathered in naturalistic rather than controlled conditions. This is not to say that methods that elicit data through questionnaires, structured interviews or experiments are not employed or that they have nothing to tell us about writing. It is simply that there has been a strong preference for collecting data in authentic circumstances not specifically set up for the research, such as via classroom observations or analyses of naturally occurring texts. The main methods for researching writing are summarized in Figure 19.1 (Hyland 2003) and discussed briefly below.

Questionnaires:	Highly focused elicitations of respondent self reports about actions and attitudes.
Interviews:	Adaptable and interactive elicitations of respondent self reports.
Verbal reports:	Retrospective accounts and think-aloud reports of thoughts while composing.
Written reports:	Diary or log accounts of personal writing or learning experiences.
Observation:	Direct or recorded data of 'live' interactions or writing behaviour.
Texts:	Study of authentic examples of writing used for communication in a natural context.
Case studies:	A collection of techniques capturing the experiences of participants in a situation.

FIGURE 19.1 *Main data collection methods for researching writing*

Elicitation: Questionnaires and interviews

These are the main methods for eliciting information and attitudes from informants. *Questionnaires* are widely used for collecting large amounts of structured, often numerical, easily analysable self-report data, while interviews offer more flexibility and greater potential for elaboration and detail. Both allow researchers to tap people's views and experiences of writing, but interviews tend to be more qualitative and heuristic and questionnaires more quantitative and conclusive. Questionnaires are particularly useful for exploratory studies into writing attitudes and behaviours and for identifying issues that can be followed-up later by more in-depth methods. One major use of questionnaires in writing research has been to discover the kinds of writing target communities require from students. Rogerson-Revell (2007),

for example, used a questionnaire to shed light on participants' use of English in business meetings in a European company and to identify some of the language difficulties that can result.

Interviews offer more interactive and less predetermined modes of eliciting information. Although sometimes little more than oral questionnaires, interviews generally represent a very different way of understanding human experience, regarding knowledge as generated between people rather than as objectified and external to them. Participants are able to discuss their interpretations and perspectives, sharing what writing means to them rather than responding to preconceived categories. This flexibility and responsiveness means that interviews are used widely in writing research to learn more about *writing practices* (to discover the genres people write and how they understand and go about writing); about *teaching and learning practices* (to discover people's beliefs and practices about teaching and learning); and about *discourse-features* (to discover how text users see and respond to particular features of writing). Interviews are particularly valuable as they can reveal issues that might be difficult to predict, such as how students interpret teacher written feedback (Hyland, 2013a) or the intentions of faculty tutors in marking undergraduate assignments (Hyland, 2013b).

Introspection: Verbal and written reports

The use of *verbal reports* as data reflects the idea that the process of writing requires conscious attention and that at least some of the thought process involved can be recovered, either as a retrospective written or spoken recall or simultaneously with writing as a think-aloud protocol.

Protocols involve participants writing in their normal way but instructed to verbalize all thinking at the same time so that information can be collected on their decisions, their strategies and their perceptions as they work. Think-aloud data have been criticized as offering an artificial and incomplete picture of the complex cognitive activities involved in writing. For one thing, many cognitive processes are routine and internalized operations and therefore not available to verbal description while, more seriously, the act of verbal reporting may itself slow task progress or distort the process being reported on. But despite these criticisms, the method has been widely used, partly because the alternative is to deduce cognitive processes solely from subjects' behaviour, and this would obviously be far less reliable. Think-aloud techniques have been extremely productive in revealing the strategies writers use when composing, particularly what students do when planning and revising texts. In one study, for example, de Larios et al. (1999) used the method to examine what students did when they were blocked by a language problem or wanted to express a different meaning, tracing the patterns they used in searching for an alternative syntactic plan.

Diaries offer an alternative way of gaining introspective data. These are first-person accounts of a language-using experience, documented through regular entries in a journal and then analysed for recurring patterns or significant events. Diarists can be asked to produce 'narrative' entries which freely introspect on their learning or writing experiences or set guidelines to restrict the issues addressed. These can be in the form of detailed points to note ('write about what you found most/least interesting about this class') or a loose framework for response ('note all the work you did to complete this task'). Alternatively, researchers may ask diarists to concentrate only on 'critical incidents' of personal significance or to simply record dates and times of writing. While some diarists may resent the time and intrusion involved, diaries provide a rich source of reflective data which can reveal social and psychological processes difficult to collect in other ways. Thus, Nelson (1993) used diaries to discover how her students went about writing a research paper, following their trail through the library, how they evaluated sources and took notes, the conversations they had with others, decisions they made and so on. This approach provided a rich account of writers' reflections, suggesting why they acted as they did and how they saw contextual influences.

Observations

While elicitation and introspective methods provide reports of what people *say* they think and do, observation methods offer actual evidence of it by systematic documentation of participants engaged in writing and learning to write. They are based on conscious noticing and precise recording of actions as a way of seeing these actions in a new light. Once again there are degrees of structure the researcher can impose on the data, from simply checking pre-defined boxes at fixed intervals or every time a type of behaviour occurs, to writing a full narrative of events. The most highly structured observations employ a prior coding scheme to highlight significant events from the mass of data that taped or live observation can produce (see Hyland 2003 for examples). All observation will necessarily privilege some behaviours and neglect others, as we only record what we think is important, but while a clear structure is easier to apply and yields more manageable data, such pre-selection may ignore relevant behaviour that wasn't predicted.

Observation is often combined with other methods, as in Camitta's (1993) 3-year study of vernacular writing among adolescents. She observed and interviewed writers of different races and genders between the ages of 14 and 18 outside school, in free school time when they clustered in groups to talk and write, and in writing surreptitiously in class. She found that these students produced a wide variety of genres and that when writing was free of school constraints it generated considerable interest and much oral sharing.

Text data

Finally, a major source of data for writing research is writing itself: the use of texts as objects of study. While texts can be approached in a variety of ways, most research now seeks to discover how people use language in specific contexts. The main approaches to studying written texts are currently genre and corpus analyses.

Genre analysis

This embraces a range of tools and attitudes to texts, from detailed qualitative analyses of a single text to more quantitative counts of language features. Sometimes researchers work with a single text, either because it is inherently interesting or because it seems representative of a larger set of texts or particular genre. A major policy speech, a newspaper editorial or an important scientific article can offer insights into forms of persuasion, particular syntactic or lexical choices, or the views of text writers. More generally, a sample essay may shed light on students' uses of particular forms or the assumptions underlying different choices. Bhatia (1993) suggests some basic steps for conducting a genre analysis which emphasize the importance of locating texts in their contexts as presented in Figure 19.2.

Such an approach forms a *case study*, but while this is a widely recognized method, it raises questions about how far a single text can be representative of a genre. Representativeness is strengthened if several texts are analysed, and corpus analyses, drawing on evidence from large databases of electronically encoded texts, are the main way of achieving this.

1 Select a text which seems representative of the genre you want to study.

2 Place the text in a situational context, that is, use your background knowledge and text clues to guess where the genre is used, by whom and why it is written the way it is.

3 Compare the text with other similar texts to ensure that it broadly represents the genre.

4 Study the institutional context in which the genre is used (through site visits, interviews, manuals, etc.) to better understand its conventions.

5 Select a focus for analysis (moves, lexis, cohesion, persuasion, etc.) and analyse it.

6 Check your analysis with a specialist informant to confirm your findings and insights.

FIGURE 19.2 *Steps in genre analysis (after Bhatia 1993, pp. 22–34)*

Corpus analysis

A *corpus* is simply a collection of naturally occurring language samples (often consisting of millions of words) which represent a speaker's experience of language in some restricted domain, thereby providing a more solid basis for

genre descriptions. A corpus provides an alternative to intuition by offering both a resource against which intuitions can be tested and a mechanism for generating them. This enables analysts to depict what is usual in a genre, rather than what is simply grammatically possible, and helps to suggest explanations for why language is used as it is in particular contexts.

Corpus studies are therefore based on both qualitative and quantitative methods, using evidence of *frequency* and *association* as starting points for interpretation. *Frequency* is based on the idea that if a word, string or grammatical pattern occurs regularly in a particular genre or subset of language, then we can assume it is significant in how that genre is routinely constructed. *Association* refers to the ways features associate with each other in collocational patterns. A concordance program brings together all instances of a search word or phrase in the corpus as a list of unconnected lines of text and so allows the analyst to see regularities in its use that might otherwise be missed. In other words, we can see instances of language *use* when we read these lines horizontally and evidence of *system* when we read them vertically, pointing to common usage in this genre.

In a study of the acknowledgement sections from 240 masters and doctoral dissertations, for example, I found a strong tendency to use the noun *thanks* in preference to other expressions of gratitude (Hyland 2004). Sorting concordance lines on the word to the left of this search word revealed this noun was modified by only three adjectives: *special, sincere* and *deep* with *special* making up over two-thirds of all cases. Figure 19.3 is a screen shot from the program *MonoConc Pro* showing part of the results of this sorting.

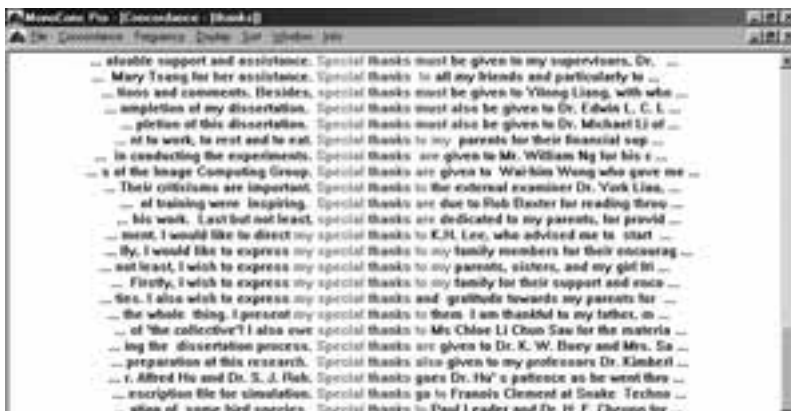

FIGURE 19.3 *Special thanks pattern in Masters/Doctoral acknowledgements*

A sample study

To illustrate some of these ideas and to show what one approach to writing research looks like in practice, the remainder of this chapter reports on a study of Hong Kong undergraduates' writing I conducted a few years ago (Hyland 2002). I will discuss the main stages under four headings: framing issues, selecting methods, collecting data and analysing data.

Framing the issue

The study emerged from a sense that my undergraduate students had considerable problems constructing a credible representation of themselves and their work in their research writing. They seemed reluctant to claim an appropriate degree of authoritativeness in their texts and to get behind their statements, making their work seem anonymous and disembodied. I decided to pursue these impressions by investigating how these students used authorial pronouns, framing the issue by relating the use of first person to rhetorical identity. This sees identity as less a phenomenon of private experience than a need for affiliation and recognition in particular social networks. When we write in particular genres, there is strong pressure to take on their forms and represent ourselves in a way valued by that community. This does not mean that writers simply slot into ready-made identities, but it limits individual manoeuvre. Newcomers, however, often find that the discourses of their disciplines support identities very different from those they bring with them from their home cultures, which prevent them from communicating appropriate commitments and undermine their relationship to readers.

Selecting methods

Framing pronoun use in terms of the constraints on rhetorical conventions of personality suggested two possible lines of inquiry. Basically, to adopt an ethnographic approach and focus on particular writers, investigating their personal and social histories and how these influenced their writing of academic assignments or to look for preferred choices of pronoun use in a representative collection of student writing and interview writers about their choices. I decided on the latter, partly because I was more comfortable with the methods involved and partly because I wanted a wider picture of how they saw the demands of the task and chose to represent themselves in this context. A corpus approach offers a starting point for analysis by providing quantitative information about the relative frequency and use

of self-mention, pointing to systematic tendencies in students' choices of meanings. To understand why writers made the choices they did, I decided to support the text data with interviews, using focus groups as a way of reducing the threat to these L2 students.

Collecting data

To ensure that the text samples were representative of undergraduate research writing, I compiled a corpus of sixty-four final year project reports, a genre of 8,000–12,000 words and by far the most substantial piece of writing students do in their undergraduate careers. I obtained a broad cross-section of academic practice by collecting eight reports from each of eight different degree programs, including sciences, engineering, social sciences, technology and business. This involved getting agreement from writers and electronic copies of their reports. I then computer-searched the corpus for the first person uses *I*, *me*, *my*, *we*, *us*, *our*, *mine* and *ours* using a commercially available concordance program and checked all cases to ensure they were exclusive first person uses.

While corpus analyses are excellent for telling us what writers do, to stop here runs the danger of reifying conventions rather than explaining them. I therefore conducted interviews with a supervisor from each field and with student writers. The supervisors were asked about their own writing, that of their students and their impressions of disciplinary practices. The student interviews required more scaffolding and a more supportive environment and were conducted as focus groups of four or five students. All interviews had two parts. First, I asked participants to respond to features in selected texts as either writers or members of the readership for whom the texts were composed as a way of making explicit the tacit knowledge or strategies that they brought to acts of composing or reading. This was followed by more general observations of pronoun use to learn how respondents saw the practices of the cultures and communities that influenced their writing. All interviews were taped and written up as a summary immediately after the session and subsequently returned to several times, often with the assistance of the subjects.

Analysing data

The frequency counts showed 637 occurrences. In several sweeps of the data, I also noted the surrounding text of the target words to identify recurring pragmatic functions. Checking concordance lines is a recursive procedure which involves trying to narrow down, expand and combine

initial categories. This recursion allowed me to classify each instance as performing one of five functions, either stating a goal, explaining a procedure, stating results or claims, expressing self-benefits or elaborating an argument. I validated the analysis by asking a colleague to independently code a sample of data.

In order to better understand student choices, I compared the findings with those of expert writers using an existing corpus of 240 published research articles in cognate disciplines. These papers were selected from journals on students' reading lists and totalled 1.3 million words, twice as large as the student corpus in order to strengthen observations about expert practices, as opposed to those about a specific student population. Analysis of the two corpora showed that first person pronouns were substantially more frequent in the published corpus and that the students generally sought to downplay their authorial identity by consciously avoiding its most authoritative functions such as making a commitment to an interpretation or claim. In other words, they sought to deny ownership and responsibility for their views. I set out to investigate these findings further through the interviews.

I also approached the interview data recursively using a form of *content analysis*, beginning with obvious or recurring topics and looking for themes. Subsequent passes through the data helped to generate and refine categories, identify core ideas, find links and gradually build a picture of the data. I attended to the frequency with which particular ideas occurred, the strength of their expression, their distribution across the informants and the rationale for the study. The data revealed a lot about beliefs and practices and raised issues concerning the students' intentions in using self-mention, their previous encounters with it in textbooks and class teaching and their sense of its meanings. It showed that the students were sensitive to the effects of author pronouns and reluctant to accept its clear connotations of authority and commitment. They viewed the use of *I* with misgivings as it seemed to imply an identity they did not want. Together, analysis of the corpus and interview material suggested that culture and context shape our communicative practices in significant ways, influencing our preferences for structuring information, the relationships we establish with our readers and how far we want to personally appear in our texts.

Conclusions

I have attempted to provide an overview of writing research approaches in this chapter. While space prevents elaboration, I hope to have shown that the questions we ask, the methods we adopt and the ways we interpret data are all products of the ways we understand what writing is. Explanation involves selecting texts and features through the filter of our theories and research interests and sifting out the ways that writers' interests, beliefs, affiliations, experiences, values and practices appear to influence their

writing. Because these are not things that can be directly observed, the researcher must select from a repertoire of interpretations rather than hit on the truth, but by grounding these interpretations in written and oral data we help to ensure that they are not pure speculation either. Ultimately, all we can claim for our research is that our findings are a plausible interpretation of some aspect of a given context of communication.

Resources for further reading

Baker, P 2006, *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis*, Continuum, London.

This is an accessible guide to creating and analysing written corpora. Topics covered include corpus building, concordancing, keyness, frequency and dispersion.

Hyland, K 2003, *Second Language Writing*, Cambridge University Press, New York, NY.

This is a teachers' guide to analysing and teaching L2 writing, with chapters on establishing students' needs, designing syllabuses, creating and sequencing tasks and feedback and assessment. It contains a chapter on different writing research methods with examples.

Hyland, K in press, 2016 *Teaching and Researching Writing*, 3rd edn, Routledge, London.

This book is an overview of writing with an up-to-date discussion of theories on writing together with methods for research and teaching. It also contains ideas for writing research projects together with example studies.

Bazerman, C, Krut, R, Lunsford, K, McLeod, S, Null, S, Rogers, P & Stansell, A (eds), 2010, *Traditions of Writing Research*, Routledge, London.

Chapters in this book reflect different approaches to writing research and addressing topics such as early childhood to academic writing and focusing on a range of different contexts.

There are also a number of free concordance tools on the web which allow you to search a range of academic, student, newspaper and literary corpora. The best of these are:

VLC Web Concordancer at: http://vlc.polyu.edu.hk/concordance/, viewed 14 January 2015.CobuildDirect site at: http://www.collins.co.uk/corpus/CorpusSearch.aspx, viewed 15 January 2015.

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