A Bird in the Hand is Worth Two in the Bush

As an undergraduate student of U of A, I indeed have lots of experiences on writing, especially academic writing. Although I think the key to academic writing is focusing on one field as deep as possible, many students may try to cover as much content as possible in academic writing. Only in this way you can comprehend your topic better. Here, I would like to tell you some of my experiences in academic writing and how I changed my ideas through these experiences.

Several months ago, when I was doing my internship in a software company, my leader told me to make a report about the feasibility of some project. At first, I wanted to finish that work as quickly as possible. I thought this was a hard job and I should analyze all the possible solutions to this project. I read 6 essays in 2 weeks and tried to make a report based on these essays. Finally, I finished that report. However, it is not as good as it looked like, because these were all frontier essays which contain some difficult theories and I didn’t have enough knowledge to understand it well. I just knew the surface of it. Packed with a lot of terminology such as “Efficient Neural Architecture Search,” the report did not have a clear clue in it and make people confused. Several days later I made a presentation based on this report. Some of my colleagues had knowledge of that project, but they still felt confused about some parts of the report. I could hardly answer questions because their questions could also be my own questions. Even if my report is not that good, my colleagues showed their comprehension. I made a report based on 6 essays in just 2 weeks. Therefore bad quality is forgivable and foreseeable.

Several days later I got another task to make a report. I tried another way to make it. Instead of looking for as much material as possible, I just focused on one essay. I read the essay, read the code of it, changed the code of it, and I tried to find problems of the essay. Some of the problems could be solved by asking my colleagues or searching on the website and some are not. I rebuild the code because it can help my comprehension. Finally, I used 6 weeks on this essay and I thought I totally understood it. This time, I made a report, all the questions asked by my colleagues were answered. Besides, I also raised a lot of questions of the essay and indicated some limitations of it. With experimental data given, all my colleagues are convinced by my report. This is a considerable progress compared to the previous report.

This story told me that for academic writing like reporting on essays, understanding is most important. In an academic report, I need to persuade my listeners with my ideas. Before convincing my listeners I should convince myself first. I should first persuade myself that all of these methods will work well. In addition, I should have good enough comprehension and expression skill to show my ideas to the listener. Another lesson that I learned is “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”. That means focus on one field instead of slightly tasting in all fields. In the first report, I referenced 6 essays but not totally understand them. That makes me forgettable and a bit mixed about these essays. They all talk about similar things. I also don’t have enough time to comprehend them, I just remembered the key points that looks important. Somehow it works, but after several months, I nearly forget all the things about them. However, in the second time, I used a lot of time to make sure that I am a master of it. I made many tests and improvements based on the original version, that makes me comprehend deeper and deeper about it. Even now, I can still remember the core idea and structure of it.

What is the most important part of academic writing? In my opinion, the main purpose of academic writing is to raise a new idea, to create a new method. No matter the idea is correct or not. In the student era, we usually asked to show our understanding of something. However, in real academic writing, what you understand is not important, the important thing is what you can raise from your knowledge. The basic of creating new ideas is that you should be proficient on the field you are writing about. For the average person like me, being proficient on several fields at the same time is impossible. Sea of knowledge is endless(Zhuangzi 3), and what I can do is cup a handful of water that closest to me. I will focus on the field that I am expert in until I can make some creative academic writing. Academic writing is neither that easy nor that hard, the key point I think is: Grab the bird that is nearest to you. Be proficient and extend the field that you are expert in. I think it is the same for non-academic writing. The main purpose of all writing is to share and save knowledge, especially new knowledge. Similarly, the final goal for a writer should be creating new ideas instead of just repeating ideas that already exist.

Cited list:

Zhuangzi. 《Zhuangzi》. N/A, N/A, about 300BC.