# About Writing and Journals

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Abstract

*The manuscript provides a brief explanation of the iterative nature of writing as a cognitive process. It draws from famous authors to illustrate selected advice on writing, arguing and reading. The advice is substantiated by the personal experience of the author and emphasises the strong link between engaging with a journal and improving as a writer. It closes with a call for active participation in subsequent issues of this journal.*

My professors and supervisors claim that to put text on paper is key to successful academic work. To formulate and explicate the arguments is more than just moving knowledge from your mind to paper or computer—or as Linda Flower and John R. Hayes put it in their seminal work: "In the act of writing, people regenerate or recreate their own goals in the light of what they learn" (Flower and Hayes 381).

Writing is a cognitive process with three phases that are entangled: planning, translating, and reviewing. Very roughly, planning is the phase of building a tacit representation of what you want to write in your mind. Translating is to explicate the tacit representation and to put it into visible language, and reviewing is to evaluate and revise. The phases are intertwined and do not occur in a linear sequence. Instead, the writer cycles through the phases multiple times in different orders, making writing an iterative cognitive process. As part of the recurring planning phase, the internal representation of what the writer has in mind changes, developing the argument further. Developing the argument is essential for compelling writing and conducting science, as for scholars, writing is a crucial instrument.

For example, everyone knows the feeling of having everything perfectly thought out, only to struggle when eventually attempting to write it down. While some of it may be due to lack of fitting words, oftentimes it is because the argument is underdeveloped. "Writing is refined thinking", as Stephen King argues (131).

Like every other craft, writing does not come as easy to many, with few mastering the skill. Mr. Stephen King goes as far as to say, "if you're a bad writer, no one can help you become a good one, or even a competent one". Nevertheless, he provides insight on what makes a good writer in his autobiography. "Write a lot" is the most obvious piece of advice. Just like painting or hitting the six strings—and basically everything else—practice is at the core of composing harmonious texts. Part of this is "mastering the fundamentals" (King 142), i.e. using the targeted language at a competent level of vocabulary, grammar and style.

Explaining the craft of writing, King introduces the metaphor of a writer's toolbox, which contains one's most commonly utilised elements such as words, phrases and rhetoric: altogether, your writing style. Because you cannot use all the words or figures out there, you construct your own toolbox of language. This involves creating your own style; putting your favourite words and phrases at the top of the toolbox, while other tools are placed further down in the box. Although this metaphor has some drawbacks, for example, it does not consider

how all the elements of writing must play together, it nonetheless illustrates how one can develop writing skills over time, just like a mechanic builds his box of tools.

Not everything should go at the top of this toolbox, though, for excess use of particular elements may lead to inarticulate writing. It is important not to abuse the passive voice, which lacks the clarity of action and agency, and adverbs as "using adverbs is a mortal sin" (Leonard 18). They weaken your statements and create redundancies. Consider, for example, *to sprint quickly*, which contains an unnecessary adverb that does not add any information. Similar advice has been given on adjectives and quantifiers. However, this is not a golden rule, because the words do have a place if used moderately. The right amount is often a personal choice, but it is ideal to keep the text condensed. This does not mean to only write short sentences; rather, you should focus on the relevant parts. "Strip every sentence to its cleanest components", William Zinsser suggests, "Simplify, simplify [...] prune ruthlessly" (16) . An eight-page article can be cut down to four pages. After that, the hard part is cutting it down to three.

Even before you can start to cut your manuscript, however, you need a text to begin with. This is challenging, really challenging, in fact—and can culminate in the form of writer's block. Fortunately, Anne Lamott provides simple, yet effective, advice. You start "bird by bird" (24), which means to proceed word by word. She suggests to start with "shitty first drafts" (22) as a foundation, which you can work with, revise, and carry on from. Perfectionism may hinder your progress, especially at the beginning. I have experienced in academia, that authors rethink single words many times in their early drafts. They lose focus of their writing goal and impede their own progress as a result. Precise terminology is certainly imperative in academia, since many words may be loaded or have sophisticated meanings in different communities. Yet, if you feel like you cannot put your ideas to paper, I recommend you to jot down a first (shitty) draft of your argument and basic ideas. You can rethink problematic areas in the revision phase later.

Beyond single words, Landon (13) argues that sentences are at the heart of a text, for they lay out the bare propositions of any manuscript, in particular for prose. On the contrary, I believe that the paragraph should be the central unit of a text. Only the paragraph can link multiple statements together to form a coherent argument, which in combination with a clear narrative is crucial for compelling argumentation. An interesting model of argumentation is the Toulmin method, which links claims and evidence via warrants, i.e. the logic or theory to reason with and interpret the evidence in order to make statements (Toulmin 87). Apart from being sound in the argument, a compelling narrative should deliver a harmonious rhythm, for the reason that readers listen to a narrative with their inner voice. Accordingly, I argue that the substance of the argument and the quality of writing are inherently linked, to form convincing paragraphs—and ultimately, manuscripts.

When writing, I sometimes struggle with keeping everything in the argument together, and at the same time cutting the unnecessary parts. What helps me is to make any implicit claims of the argument explicit, by asking myself questions: What is the claim? What is the evidence? Why do I put this claim at this position? Is the claim necessary? Asking questions often lets me shape and sharpen my argument, and identify what is missing and what I need to cut.

Although taking it word by word is good advice, basic ideas are required for a first draft. This leads us from writing as a practice to reading, which is important for both academic writing and crafting fiction. Reading provides ideas, and in a scholarly setting, provides the theoretical base for your work, in which you position yourself. Drawing from other works can substantiate your arguments and provide new perspectives for your thoughts.

An essential skill of a competent reader is critical thinking. Read controversial articles; for example, opinion pieces in peer-reviewed journals, or op-eds in the New York Times. It is helpful to discern the arguments, and understand why they are given as is. Again, it helps to ask questions and make the claims, evidence and warrants explicit. Critical thinking takes time! That is why it helps me to have readings on my phone, to read during breaks, in the lunch queue, or in the gym, while carrying paper printouts can also be beneficial. Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise (*English Standard Version Bible*, Proverbs 13:20). Not only does reading add to your arguments, it also improves your toolbox, supplements your vocabulary and shapes your writing style. When reading, I like to take notes, draft short vignettes or a first paragraph, which helps to overcome the challenge of putting down those first words.

> Take a pencil to write with on aeroplanes. Pens leak. But if the pencil breaks, you can't sharpen it on the plane, because you can't take knives with you. Therefore: take two pencils. If both pencils break, you can do a rough sharpening job with a nail file of the metal or glass type (Atwood)[1].

Another good advice of hers is to "do back exercises. Pain is distracting" (Atwood). It is especially good advice for students, people like you and me, who spend far too much time on their computers or phones.

Even though you read and write, and despite critically thinking and formulating your arguments, you may still end up at a dead end. After working on something for a long time, I tend to get so immersed that I have difficulties taking a step back to reflect on the manuscript. To help me leave the immersion, I copy and paste my draft into other word processing tools, export it as a pdf or print it out, so that it looks different as I try to break out of this vicious cycle, and judge it from a distance. In a similar vein, it helps to put the manuscript away for some time and sleep over it to revise at a later time. It is also constructive to discuss matters with your peers to get feedback on your arguments and drafts. Every person has a different perspective and can potentially contribute to your argument or point out flaws. Discussing with people helps tremendously in the phase of reviewing, more so if these people are experts within their field, making peer review common in academia.

Because discussions are such helpful instruments, the student journal is a great idea. It creates a space for engaging matters of interest with peers to improve and revise arguments as well as whole manuscripts. Writing is an iterative process, and all of the phases can be supported by other people, i.e. they help you to shape and sharpen your ideas, find the right words and to revise your text. A journal is an outlet for practice, to engage with peers and other students, get comments and further develop your text in a written conversation.

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[1] More quotes here: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/feb/20/ten-rules-for-writing-fiction-part-one.

Besides improving single pieces of prose, the journal enables students to learn about editorial work and the process of publishing. You will need to prepare a manuscript, follow the guidelines, and keep in mind the target outlet and audience. After submission of your manuscript, you will pass through the review process, deal with reviewers as well as editors, and as part of the process revise your manuscript. Eventually, you will also deal with frustration and the all too frequent revision rounds and rejections.

Because of the latter, many authors, myself included, are afraid of putting their work out there, because they inevitably open themselves up and make themselves vulnerable to have their arguments and writing criticised—sometimes heavily. The good news is that nobody is alone in having these feelings since all writers live through this.[2] The bad news is, even if you are accomplished, the feeling does not go away. "Only bad writers think that their work is really good", as Enright once said (Atwood).

At this point, I find it quite amusing that being an Information Systems student with English as a second language, and certainly not a master of the craft, I have mouthed off about how to write, to a journal that addresses English students. By submitting my text to the journal, I have made myself vulnerable. I encourage you to do the same. I call for you to be creative and submit your works to subsequent issues, especially if you are unsure, because the student journal is the perfect opportunity to overcome your reservations. I hope that some of my experiences and the bits of information I have laid out, may provoke you to respond with your own ideas, and be engaged in discussion and controversy. Follow the footsteps of authors, such as Anne Lamott or Stephen King, who have started their careers by writing for college or school papers. "Writing has so much to give, so much to teach", according to Anne Lamott (xvii), and "working on the text is working at the thought." as Dürrenmatt said (Ulmi 7)[3]. I am looking forward to reading the first issue, your future manuscripts, and I appreciate the initiative.

[2] See also: https://shitmyreviewerssay.tumblr.com.
[3] My translation.

**Works Cited**

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