

# Workshop

## Becoming a Better Academic Writer

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## Steps in academic text production

*This is a general review of all the steps involved in producing a substantial amount of scientific text. Academic writing is recursive process, i.e. many of these steps are repeated throughout the course of the process of writing a text (e.g. constructing precise questions).*

### • Negotiate a working agreement

With the person who supervises and assesses your work, clarify:

- what is required and when: what knowledge are you supposed to have, how are you expected to show it, etc?
- how you will be supervised: feedback, revision deadlines, interim agreements, etc.

### • Orientation and planning phase

- limits of the topic, developing a research question and making it concrete
- planning content and time horizons, maybe write an exposé

### • Research and collecting material

- searching for, selecting, and obtaining literature
- reading, summarizing important points (making excerpts), evaluating
- finding data sources
- collecting and documenting data
- interpreting data

### • Structuring

- systematising material
- establishing structures, generalising
- drafting text structure

### • Writing the first version

- formulating ideas in accordance with the structure; ignore language/style at this stage!

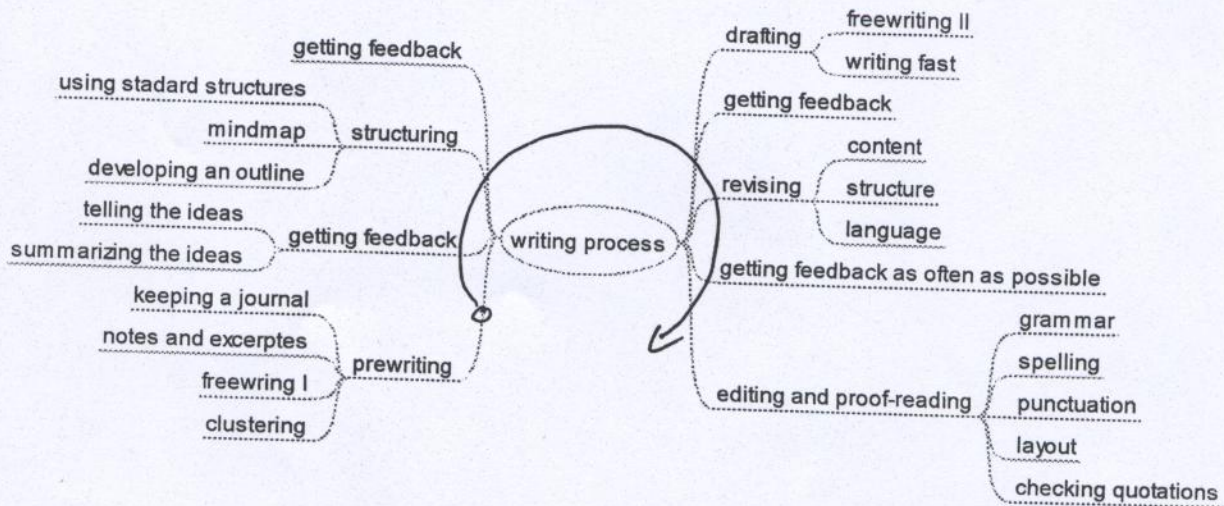
### • Revision

- content (comprehensible? Is anything missing?)
- language/style (appropriate? appealing?)
- formal aspects (footnotes, proofs, citations etc. correct and clearly marked, ...?)
- grammar and spelling (mistakes? typos?)
- layout (font, margins, format, etc.)

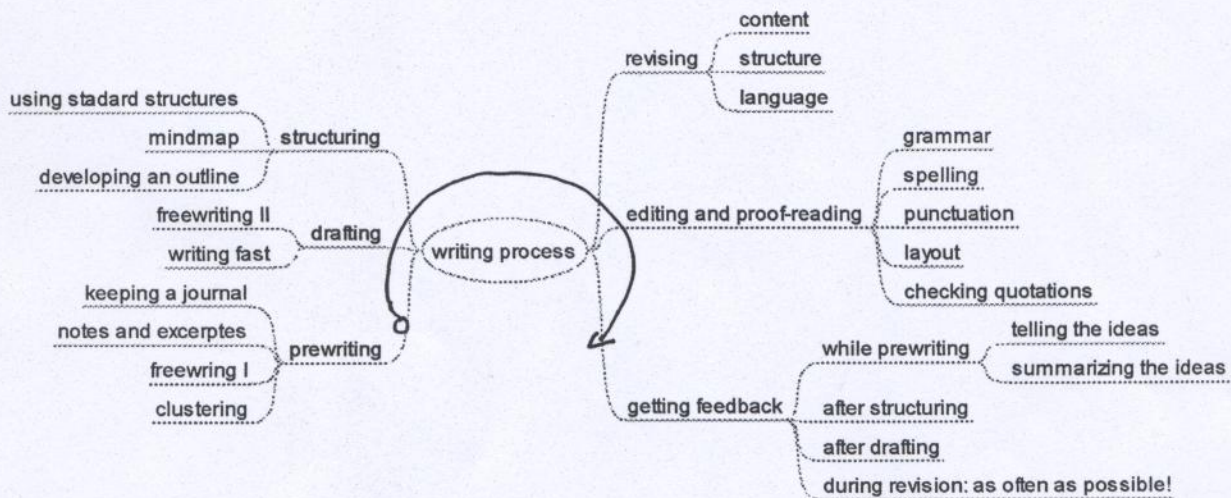


## Finding a structure

Mind map 1



Mind map 2





**formulating with scientific precision = formulate so clearly that  
it is not possible to misunderstand what you have written**

- **The right expression for the right thing** (e.g. *and* is not the same as *but*; *to suppose* does not mean the same as *to conclude*, etc.)
- **Use technical terms** (e.g. *Calendula officinalis* instead of *marigold*).
- **Use the same word for the same thing**, no stylistic variations of essential terms (George W. Bush, for example, should always be referred to as *George W. Bush* and not as *the Texan*, *the guy in the White House*, etc.)
- **combine and form words correctly**  
(e.g. *serum from new-born calves*, not *new-born-calf serum*; *relationship between coach and client*, not *coaching relationship*)
- **Formulate clearly:**
  - **avoid semantic ambiguity** (a *bank* may be a river boundary or an institution for saving money)
  - **avoid syntactic ambiguity** (e.g. *Student looking for apartment with bedroom in which he can give private lessons:*  
*in which* could refer to both the apartment and the bedroom).
  - **clearly indicate connections to referential indices** (e.g. *here*, *yesterday*, *tomorrow*, *this*, *that*, etc., refer to different things in different contexts)
- **Avoid inaccuracies:**
  - **Avoid vagueness** (e.g. *Liz Taylor is 5 feet 4 inches tall and small compared to Nadja Auermann, who is six feet tall*, not: *Liz Taylor is small*).
  - **Avoid non-specific statements** (e.g., instead of saying: *Writing broadens the mind* say e.g.: *Writing broadens the mind by being more than simply the emission of readymade thoughts; many thoughts develop and gain precision only in the process of writing.*)



**Attention!** The following general guidelines and recommendations are based on the Publication manual of the American psychological Association<sup>1</sup>. The guidelines of the journal you are submitting to may differ in some detail. Please, check it in advance! In addition, it is very helpful to analyze some recent articles of this journal with regards to structure, citation etc.

## Guidelines for an abstract

**Function of your abstract:** The abstract of your article permits potential readers to get a quick overview of your study and to decide if they wish to read the article itself. Titles and abstracts are also indexed and compiled in reference works and computerized databases. Therefore, title and abstract should accurately reflect the content of the article and include key words that will ensure their retrieval from a database. **Title:** It should be fully explanatory when standing alone and identify the theoretical issues or the variables under investigation. Because you will not be able to mention all the features of your study in the title (or even in the abstract), you must decide which are most important.

**title:** 10 – 12 words; **text:** up to 120 words (depending on the journal!)

### structure/ guiding questions

**problem statement:** what problem are you going to solve?

**motivation / relevance:** why is it important to solve this problem?

**approach/method:** how did you go about solving the problem?

**results:** what is your solution to the problem?

**conclusions:** what are the implications of your solution?

### Please check and revise your abstract:

is the structure intelligible? => look for an adequate sequence of the information

is it clear enough on the sentence level? => look for possible misunderstandings

is it as informative as possible?

=> delete superfluous words

=> choose more specific words

errors / questions concerning terminology? the English language?

<sup>1</sup> American Psychological Association. (2001). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) Washington, DC: Author.



## Basic structure of a research paper

*In different disciplines research papers may differ in structure. This is a difference only in surface. Across the disciplines every research paper has to give answers to the following questions:*

- What is the publication about? (research topic, problem)
- Why is it important/interesting to look into this question? (relevance)
- Who found out what about it? (current state of research)
- What has not been found out? Which questions have not been asked/answered before? (gap in research)
- How have I tried to close this gap? (methods)
- What did I find out? (results)
- How is my contribution to be judged in the light of the research done up to now? (discussion)
- What new questions for research arise? (desiderata)  
*↓ something desired or wanted.*



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# Audience-oriented Writing

## Exercise

Write an imaginary application for financial support of your research project. Address it to the "Foundation for Everyday Science". Your application will initially be judged by a jury completely unfamiliar with your field of research. The jury needs to be convinced that your project is important, exciting and imaginative. Only if you manage to do this you will be invited to the second round of the selection procedure, in which you will have to convince an expert committee of your project's scientific significance.

It is not important that you write a complete or perfect text. Try to start writing in a playful way. Let the following questions guide you:

- What are you researching or what do you want to research? Which question(s) are you going to answer?
- Why is it important to research this phenomenon / answer this question?
- What have other researchers found out about this phenomenon / related to this question so far?
- How did these researchers find that out?
- What new things have you found? What do you hope to discover?
- How are you going to discover these things?
- What would be gained through your discovery?

writing a proposal  
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## Tips for productive feedback about text samples

### A and B prepare the feedback

#### **Before B reads the text, A and B should agree on the precise conditions**

- What kind of text is being dealt with (final thesis, essay, seminar paper, etc.?)
- A should inform B about the context: what is the topic of the text and of the different chapters? How does each chapter contribute to the general topic? From which chapter is the text sample taken? How does the sample contribute to the chapter? (one sentence for each point)
- What kind of feedback does A want? (e.g. feedback concerning comprehensibility, spelling, organisation, logic, etc.)

### B reads the text sample

B should only check for comprehensibility in the first reading of the text:

- That means B checks for inaccuracies, breaks in logical thinking and the like and notes questions which arise in the margin and underlines the relevant passage, "what does this mean?"; "Whose opinion is this?"; "Reference?"; "Why do you say this at this point?", etc.
- If the text is also checked for strength of argument, style, grammar, or spelling, the comments in the margin should be marked accordingly (e.g. "c" for comprehensibility, "St" for style etc.)
- B should also try to comment on things well done (underline and comment: "plausible", "nicely put", etc.)

### B gives A feedback

B should give her/his feedback as briefly as possible and according to the following pattern:

- **Mention the good things first:** e.g. "I think the structure is clear", "Nice to read", etc.
- **Then always indicate the specific *passage* referred to:** page, paragraph, line (wait until A has found it)
- **Clarify which *text level* is being referred to:** "My comment refers to the term, sentence, transition from Y to Z...." etc.
- **Formulate every remark in the first person:** e.g. "I don't understand this..."
- **Formulate each critical remark as a question, if possible:** e.g. "I wonder what this means...", "I asked myself whether ..."
- **A should not comment on B's feedback:** A's should listen attentively and then say, "Thank you, I will think about it!" (A should *write* explicitly what is meant, not *tell* B!)