

Academic writing in English

Process and product: a question of priorities?

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Abstract

Throughout the educational system, and higher education is certainly no exception, the focus has all too often been on the final product and the grade awarded rather than what the student learns as part of the writing process. As a consequence, students' ability to write tends to stagnate once the basic skills have been mastered. Based on the view that the goal of higher education must be life-long learning, this article proposes a method of teaching writing in English that enables students to produce a variety of texts, from short essays, to doctoral theses, using a concise and correct style (Giltrow, Burgoyne, Gooding & Swaatsky, 2005). The method, known as process writing, focuses attention on the different elements of a text, their mutual relations, and the language and style in which these should be expressed. Process writing can be usefully combined with peer reviewing. Both methods are interactive: the teacher stimulates students "in performing and reflecting on learning activities, which lead them towards independent thinking and writing" (Riljaarsdam, Couzijn & van den Berg, 1996, pp. ix-xviii) by dividing the writing task into identifiable stages (process writing) and critiquing other students' writing (peer reviewing). Process writing

and peer reviewing take account of all capacities. More importantly, they facilitate students' ability to analyse their own and others' work.

Key words: Process writing, peer reviewing, life-long learning, independent thinking

In a world where the majority of research results are published in English, it is important that students master the conventions of academic writing in English. This is a process that is best facilitated by an interactive method that accommodates interaction on two levels: teacher/student and student/student (Björk & Räisänen, 2003). The responsibility for the final product is ultimately the student's alone; it is, however, the teacher's task to ensure that the production process is as smooth and efficient as possible (Watson, 1987). As teachers, we must provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to make wise decisions that lead not only to the achievement of a high grade but facilitate the adaptation of knowledge to new situations and demands.

The special content/structure and language of academic texts

The standard structure of research papers, IMRAD, i.e. introduction, method, results and discussion is a formula not only for writing up but also making the scientific enterprise appear logical (Hartley, 2008). The language of a scientific article is designed to give the appearance of precision and objectivity. It is also, however, the language of rhetoric and persuasion. As part of the writing programme, students must learn to avoid strategies that are misleading, such as jargon, so-called straw-men arguments, omissions, overstatements and distortions (Woods, 1999). Process writing enables students to experiment with different strategies and test their objectivity while at the same time preserving the persuasive power of the text.

Academic writing constitutes a hierarchy of overlapping processes or levels. At the bottom level, students put pen to paper or their fingers to the keyboard. The second stage incorporates the thinking that enables the text to be written and revised. At the third stage, one must consider the social context of the paper, i.e. its target group, purpose, and suitability for publication (Hedge, 1993). At the bottom, keyboarding stage, it is useful for students to keep track of the changes they make and versions they produce. Earlier versions may not only contain important information but also mistakes and problems from which the student can learn. At the second, writing and thinking level, students should be encouraged to make notes on what they are writing and thinking about during the writing process (Cotton & Gresty, 2006). In this way, they become conscious of the reasons for and nature of the decisions they make and can trace progression in their thinking and writing. Such notes are also helpful when discussing with their peer(s).

The social aspects of academic writing, the third stage, include the purpose of writing and can be divided into those that encourage, e.g. the desire to create new knowledge or gain approval, and those that impair progress, such as problems in getting started, revising the text, finding one's voice and feeling inadequate. Murray and Moore (2006) argue that factors that facilitate and inhibit writing are strongly influenced by environmental factors such as the time available to write. By dividing the writing task into identifiable stages and specifying deadlines for these, students are given sub-goals, their work is marked at regular intervals throughout the writing process, and feedback is obtained from both the teacher and peers. In this way, students are

better able to control the environmental factors that influence their work. At the same time, they receive intrinsic rewards such as personal satisfaction as they see that they are making progress. They also receive extrinsic rewards as the teacher and peer(s) are able to point to important steps forward in the research and writing processes.

The IMRAD model is particularly helpful for non-native speakers of English as it provides a structure. It does not, however, alleviate the special problems of writing in a foreign language. While students are aided by automated grammar and style checkers, a good knowledge of grammar is necessary to judge the validity of many of the automated suggestions. The boilerplate proposed and described in the present volume is an alternative (Mattisson & Schamp-Bjerede, 2012). It also works when the process writing method is adopted. Ideally, students writing at higher levels in English should have access to a native speaker, who is more aware of the subtleties and nuances that may not be noticed by non-native speakers. Such help can be given electronically, via e-mail and the Internet, and is easily incorporated into process writing.

Process writing and peer reviewing

Process writing has been defined as a series of “writing activities which move learners from the generation of ideas and the collection of data through to the ‘publication’ of a finished text” (Tribble, 1996, p. 37). It incorporates pre-writing activities, e.g. reading, brainstorming (Rao, 2007) and mind mapping (Eppler, 2006), using a range of sources, planning the writing in accordance with the model required (e.g. IMRAD), and drafting and revising (Goldstein & Carr, 1996). In the model proposed here, students are given set tasks corresponding to the different stages and elements of the text, e.g. thesis statement, introduction, method etc. Progress is monitored throughout by the teacher and peer(s). The deadlines given for each stage ensure that the text is completed on time.

It should nonetheless be noted that while the writing process may appear to be neat and chronological, it is highly dynamic as the writer moves between writing and revision in accordance with the new directions of his/her thinking process and in response to feedback from both the teacher and peer(s). Process writing is acknowledged to be one of the most effective writing instructions available not only because it enables students to achieve the best results possible given the student’s ability and situation but because it provides a useful knowledge base for future writing tasks (Björk, Bräuer, Reinecker, & Stray Jörgensen, 2003; Gillespie and Lerner, 2000).

Process writing presupposes that writing promotes language development, shapes our knowledge and “is an essential learning tool for any subject” (Björk & Räisänen, 2003, p. 22). It also facilitates critical thinking by visualising the thinking process, “thereby making reflection and revision easier” (Ibid., p. 22). Process writing enables the student to move from description to analysis, taking advantage of the input of and support from the teacher and peer(s). At all stages, it is the writer who must decide what advice and critique to accept and what to reject; this is an important part of taking responsibility for one’s work. As a result, the student not only becomes a more proficient and effective writer but also a more competent and confident reader.

Peer reviewing yields similar positive results: as students review their peer’s work, they become more critical of their own (Haley-James, 1996). It is important to distinguish between academic and personal criticism; peer reviewing is concerned solely with the former. Students must be encouraged to provide constructive criticism, always beginning and ending with a positive observation. Peer reviewing focuses on

four main areas: structure, argument (including conclusions and results), method and language/style.

All too frequently underestimated is the importance of the language of the writer (Badger & White, 2000). Peers must pay special attention to the adequacy of the language, and the conventions of academic English with respect to style, tone and vocabulary. This is often a more challenging task than critiquing the structure, method and argument of a text.

To ensure that process writing and peer reviewing function efficiently, it is necessary to adopt a suitable model, often a variation of the IMRAD one described earlier. The use of a model is a controversial issue within the field of academic writing. Some researchers such as White and Arndt (1991), for example, claim that what clearly differentiates a process-focused approach from a product-focused one is that the product, i.e. essay, report, or thesis, is not pre-conceived. As a contrasting viewpoint, I hope to show that process writing is in fact perfectly compatible with the use of a model. One model within the field of academic writing in English is that proposed by Bailey (2006), which is discussed below in a modified form.

A model for process writing with peer review

The model proposed here incorporates identification of subject, specification and evaluation of secondary material/data, selection and collection of key issues/data, note-taking, planning, conclusions, re-writing and editing. Linguistic and stylistic features are incorporated at every stage of the writing process, from draft to final version, although it is not until the final stages of writing that language and style become key issues. Above all, language and style must be consistent and appropriate to the task in hand.

The model discussed here assumes that pre-writing activities have been carried out, including mind mapping and brainstorming. Once the title of the text is established and the target group established, students must identify the areas and perspectives to be covered. All terminology must also be defined and the method identified and justified. When these components are complete and have been discussed with the student's peer(s), the text is submitted to the teacher for comment. At this stage, the teacher is able to raise possible problems related, for example, to the breadth of the topic, availability of secondary sources and potential ethical issues.

With regard to the identification and evaluation of secondary material, students are required to submit titles at an early stage in the writing process. A range of sources is encouraged, including reports, reviews, articles and books. Internet sources are accepted where the academic affiliation of the writer is specified. Students are reminded that it is important to note the date of access of internet sites. They are instructed to keep an alphabetically arranged list of references from the very beginning. This should conform to the citing system specified and be complemented as the text progresses. At this crucial stage in the research process, students should discuss all important choices with their peer(s) before submitting their material to the teacher. Individual tutorials are arranged to discuss secondary material. These are also attended by the student's peer(s). During the tutorials, the teacher and students discuss not only the relevance of the chosen literature but its purpose, i.e. is it designed to inform, persuade, describe or even entertain? Students learn that the answer to this question determines how they should use the chosen material.

As the student reads the secondary literature, notes should be made to identify the

key issues and sections for the chosen topic. It may be useful to paraphrase key sections. Where possible, students can take advantage of one another's sources and compare notes on, or paraphrases of, key issues to check possible differences in interpretation. After approximately three weeks (depending on the scope of the topic and length of text to be produced) of assembling and evaluating secondary sources, students submit to the teacher a short written summary of the range of materials to be included in their text and a justification of their choices. At this point, students are beginning to acquire the conventions of writing in English in their particular discipline, including the level of language and style expected.

At the drafting stage, coherence is emphasised. Are the different elements of the text arranged logically, and do they contain information relevant to the topic? Depending on the level of the student, it may be necessary to revise the importance of topic sentences, the content and length of paragraphs, and transitions between paragraphs and sections. During the drafting stage, the student works closely with his/her peer(s). A deadline is set for submission to the teacher of a draft of the entire text and a brief review of the content of each section. While the teacher's advice is crucial, it is important to reiterate that it must always be the student's decision as to what shall be included or excluded. When the draft is complete, attention can be turned to the organisation of the main body and the internal organisation of paragraphs.

The introduction to the text is a vital component of the draft (Gustavii, 2000). At this point, students generally need a great deal of support from their teacher and peer(s). Process writing places considerable emphasis on a clear and authoritative introduction. This should establish not only the crucial elements of the topic and the theory on which it is based but give a clear indication of the writer's style and approach. It may need to be re-written several times as the writer becomes clearer about his/her approach. Once the introductory text is complete, it may be necessary to modify it again, as the writer's thoughts and perspectives may change. At this point, students may experience writer's block (Watson, 1987). It is above all the peer's responsibility, though also the teacher's, to help overcome this and enable the student to continue writing.

The main body of the text is completed in different stages, each of which is discussed with the student's peer(s) before it is submitted to the teacher for comment. At this point, much of the editing work can be done electronically, though the student may wish to meet the teacher now and then to discuss specific problems. When most students have completed approximately one third of their text, it is useful to call together the class to discuss common problems. Students must also be reminded about the importance of correct referencing. As they approach their conclusion, an additional meeting can be held at which time students present their findings, discuss how they have used their secondary sources, and reflect on their conclusions. It is useful to remind students that readers may turn to the conclusion first to gain a summary of the main arguments or points.

The fear of writing a conclusion can to some extent be alleviated by encouraging students to return to the starting point, i.e. the title and the introduction. The possibility of incorporating suggestions for further research in the field can also be discussed. The support of the peer is crucial at this stage if the conclusion is to be more than a mere summary of the findings. Issues such as the limitations of the research and possible practical implications and proposals can be usefully discussed at this point.

The final stage, the re-writing and editing, are given a prominent position in the

process-writing model proposed here. The student's work has already been submitted several times both to the peer(s) and teacher. In the final stage, the entire text is assessed on the basis of its structure, content, language and style. Writing schedules must leave plenty of time for this process. At this point, the peer should focus on overall coherence as well as linguistic and stylistic appropriateness.

Peer review recommendations

The following is a selection of guidelines for peer review of structure, argument, method and language/style. It is in the areas of language and style that peers are likely to face the greatest difficulty in giving constructive criticism because their knowledge and experience of reading academic texts in English may be limited. As already established, it is advantageous to seek the support of a native speaker, at least at the higher levels. Students may also wish to employ the services of a professional language corrector.

Structure

Has the structure been defined and presented in the introduction? Is it logically developed throughout the text? Do the paragraphs deal with one idea at a time, are they logically arranged, and do they vary in length? How effective is the use of headings? Are the introduction and conclusion consistent with each other?

Argument

Is the argument firmly stated and logically developed? Has it been modified in the writing process? Does the conclusion support the main argument as specified in the introduction?

Method

Is the chosen method the most suitable for establishing the veracity of the argument/hypothesis? Has it been adequately explained to ensure the possibility of replication? Have its advantages and disadvantages been clearly stated and taken into consideration in the analysis of the results?

Language/style

Has the writer used grammar and speller checkers? Are there any concord errors? Is there a consistent use of British or American English?

With regard to style, is it sufficiently formal and correct for the target group and discipline? Is it consistent? Does the text contain repetitions and/or "pet" words and phrases? Is the length of sentences appropriate to the topic? Does the length of the sentences vary to avoid monotony and hold the reader's attention? Has the writer expressed him-/herself concisely or is there a tendency to verbosity? Is there any superfluous information? Is there an overuse of the passive form? Is the choice of tense appropriate and consistent? Is there an overuse of personal pronouns? Are contracted forms and jargon used? Are there any abbreviations that are not properly explained?

Conclusion

Writing and reviewing are complementary processes that must be practised if they

are to be effective. The emphasis is on interaction rather than instruction. Process writing combined with peer reviewing assumes a high level of activity both on the part of the teacher and the student. Ideally, the system should be applied in the early years of university education in order to ensure the best possible results at higher levels. The method establishes a life-long process that equips the student for future challenges, and makes him/her flexible, autonomous and reliable. While in no way denigrating the importance of the quality of the final product, it is clear that our attention as university teachers must be turned increasingly to the process by which this is achieved. Surely anything less is to sell students short if they are to perform adequately in the workplace and take full responsibility for their texts?

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