**How to write**

John McLeod

It is all very well to be aware the various kinds of publication outlet that are available and how they operate. But, for many excellent researchers, the main hurdle comes long before even starting to think about which journal to approach with a paper. That hurdle is writing. It is possible to be a gifted researcher and yet experience writing as an activity that is utterly painful and frustrating. There is no easy way around this. It may be helpful, however, to consider two propositions:

1. Writing is a skill. Everyone who writes can write better. There are ways of learning how to write more effectively.
2. Everyone can write when they are sufficiently in tune with what they are writing, when they have found their own ‘voice’ or ‘author-ity’. If you are stuck with your writing, approach the problem as a counsellor. What do you *really* want to say?

If you find writing difficult, my suggestion is that you study writing. Dig out the work of writers in your field whom you admire. How do *they* do it, how do they structure sentences, paragraphs, chapters and even whole books? There are also many books and articles that give good advice on how to write and how to create the conditions for writing.

When looking at published work from a perspective of wondering ‘How was this written?’, it is useful to develop a sensitivity to the way that articles are structured. One of the most terrifying experiences is to sit down with a blank sheet of paper or empty word-processor file in hopes of being able to grind out an article or chapter. It is much better to already have a structure or template around which one’s words and ideas can be woven. The following section provides some hints for constructing writing templates. These are not hard and fast rules. To some extent the structure may be dictated by the requirements of a journal or book editor. But the point is that, virtually always, good writing involves having a clear structure which allows the reader to follow the thread(s) of the argument through from beginning to end. Poor writing occurs when this does not happen, when the author has ‘lost the plot’.

*Some basic rules for structuring a paper, article or chapter*

Anchor the beginning and the end. There should normally be some kind of introduction, which tells the reader why this is an important topic, outlines the aims of the paper, and may also briefly describe how the article is structured (i.e., what follows). There should also normally be a conclusion, which summarises the main argument and draws out implications for the future (e.g., implications for practice, for further research, for theory-building, etc.). Omitting a conventional introduction or conclusion can have great dramatic effect and impact, but also runs the risk of making your piece incomprehensible.

Use subheadings and sections. It is difficult to write good stuff that flows on and on without any breaks. These breaks can be indicated by subheadings, section numbering, or even by lines or asterisks in the middle of the page. Each section should be brought to a close with a brief summary or conclusion, and then there should be a brief statement at the beginning of the next section introducing the new theme or sub-topic. Look at published books and articles. There are many different levels of subheading that can be used, for example major subheadings (in bold) and minor subheadings (in italics). In a few places there could also be subsidiary divisions marked by the first word or phrase of a section being italicised. It is seldom effective to go beyond three levels of subheading, except in very technical writing, or to use complex systems of numbering (e.g., section 1.2, 1.2.1, etc.). (Do not use section/paragraph numbering unless it is specifically expected or required by your target outlet – always check).

Use quotations for special effect, not to carry the main argument. As a rock fan, I tend to think about a piece of writing as similar to recording a music track. First the basic track is laid down quite simply, often with just the voice and a guitar or piano. Later, added musical layers are dubbed on, backing vocals, a full rhythm section, solos, etc. Applying this metaphor to writing, it can be seen that a quote is the same embellishment as a guitar or saxophone solo. If you write a piece that comprises a series of quotes (whether from published authors or from your research informants) it will be very difficult for readers to follow the direction of the argument. You need to learn to rely first and foremost on your own ‘voice’ and then bring in other voices to provide emphasis or contrast.

Don’t use the good stuff too early on. In any paper or chapter there will perhaps be two or three really good ideas and a lot of padding. If this is the case, then it is not sensible to include any glittering moments before more mundane material. It is better to work up to the more interesting ideas, and then use these to critique and illuminate the background material.

Do not use pie charts or histograms. Be sparing with the use of diagrams and images. Be very sparing indeed with your use of poetry. These are devices that can be very effective in the context of oral presentations, but can tend to make research papers seem cluttered (e.g., ‘Why is the author using a pie chart where the same information could be provided in two lines of text?’ ‘What did that poem actually mean…?’) or trying too hard to be persuasive.

Most sane and sensible people do not enjoy writing. Sitting on one’s own for hours at a time, struggling to produce something that may well be rejected or need to be significantly modified in the light of feedback (at some indeterminate future date), is not a particularly rewarding experience.

*Easing the pain of writing*

Here are some ‘writing rules’ that may be helpful:

1. Decide on a regular time and place where you will do your writing. This can be very different for different writers – for example, first thing in the morning, last thing at night, in a room with no distractions, in a café (J.K. Rowling), etc.
2. During that time, just write. It does not matter what you write, just get some words onto paper/into the laptop. Writing is a job. Keep at it. Some days it will flow, other days it will seem impossible. That doesn’t matter – just focus on writing.
3. Keep a notebook with you at all times, and jot down ideas that come to you. Your best ideas will probably not come to you as you write (that’s the time when you must turn the ideas into sentences and paragraphs). You have to learn to harvest the products of your imagination/unconscious whenever they reveal themselves to you.
4. Every piece of writing, no matter how long, can be broken down into a series of ‘scenes’ or sections. For example, a typical research paper consists of a sequence of 200-word ‘bits’.
5. Become interested in how other people write. How do good writers structure sentences and paragraphs. How do they capture and retain your interest? How do they succinctly report detailed information? How do they handle such difficult writing challenges as reporting their own involvement in the research (reflexivity)? At the start of your writing career, do not try to be original. Instead, be willing to copy and learn from others.
6. Write a lot and edit this savagely. As a practice exercise, take something you have written and continuously delete more and more bits of it. You will find that the more you edit, the tighter and more readable it will become.
7. Find someone who will read your final draft and be completely honest with you. If that person (i.e., a well-informed and sympathetic reader) cannot understand a word, phrase or passage, or gets confused by the structure and flow of your argument, then this needs to be changed. It does not matter if you understand what you have written – you will not be there to explain to readers what it means.
8. Find your audience and your voice. This takes time. It is valuable to give talks about your work at conferences and meetings, or teach it to your students. The more you are able to access an inner voice that is speaking to a specific audience, the easier it will be to write.

*How do you write? A self-awareness exercise*

The aim of this exercise is to give you a chance to reflect on your writing practices. You are invited to spend around 20 minutes writing your responses to the questions listed below.

The way I prepare for writing is to...

My preferred medium for writing is...

The place I use for writing is...

The time I use for writing is...

My favourite writers (academic and other) are...

What I have learned from them is...

What helps my writing is...

What holds back my writing is...

The biggest problem I have in writing is...

The best thing I ever wrote was...

What would help me to write more effectively is...

It can be valuable to document what you have written in a personal journal to enable you to reflect at some future date on how your writing skills and strategies have developed. You might also find it helpful to share what you have written (or those bits of it you choose to share) with a small group of colleagues, or with individuals who are supportive of you (e.g., your research supervisor, your therapist, etc.).