

Making hidden research skills visible:

THREE PILLIARS OF ACADEMIC WRITING SUCCESS



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Why break writing down into components?

Each of these three pillars (to the right) is separate but critical for producing academic prose. The third is perhaps the least important, but it is still its own dimension for writing improvement.

Why is it important for PhDs to be writing?

The process of writing is the process of generating novel ideas and organizing our ideas. We write to figure out what we think (Burke, 2024)! It's also an important part of an academic scholar's work. We should not let AI rob us of this opportunity.

Conversation starters

Do you know of any resources that help these components? Are there any missing dimensions? Add them here!

Resources

Booth, W. C., Colomb, G. G., Williams, J. M., Bizup, J., & Fitzgerald, W. T. (2024). *The Craft of Research*, Fifth Edition. University of Chicago Press.
Burke, D. (2024, April 25-26). *AI Text Production and the PhD* [Conference presentation]. Nye perspektiver i ph.d.-støtte: Kunstig intelligens og menneskelig ekspertise, Oslo, Norway.
Chapter 1-3, Shore, Z. (2016). *Grad School Essentials: A Crash Course in Scholarly Skills*. University of California Press.
Chapters 2, 5, 6 Nygaard, L. P. (2015). *Writing for scholars: a practical guide to making sense & being heard* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
Warren, N. L., Farmer, M., Gu, T., & Warren, C. (2021). *Marketing Ideas: How to Write Research Articles that Readers Understand and Cite*. Journal of Marketing, 85(5), 42-57.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429211003560>
Williams, J. M., Colomb, G. G., & Colomb, G. C. (1990). *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*. University of Chicago Press.

Writing mindsets and HABITS

When it comes to writing, habits and mindsets really matter. Bachelor's and master's programs typically involve coursework with shorter papers and strict deadlines, which students use to push their writing forward. PhD students must shift from deadline driven coursework to a 3 or 4-year undertaking without strict deadlines along the way. It is critical to develop productive writing habits and mindsets. Academic careers have unique challenges. Good habits can be developed.

Writing habits challenges / mindset shifts

- Writing and academic productivity are the most important things for scholars' career advancement. But there is very little day-to-day accountability for these activities.
- *Mental shift* from "scholars need huge blocks of time to write" defining small tasks and using small time chunks.
- Academic perfectionism - All or nothing looks like nothing.

Recommended reading

Writing for scholars ch. 2

Structure and ARGUMENTATION

Research is driven by arguments, but PhD students are rarely explicitly taught how to construct a strong academic argument. Rather, they are expected to acquire and glean it through the process of reading articles and receiving feedback on their own writing. The library can make this invisible process of argumentation more straightforward and support young researchers in distilling and critiquing others' arguments, and in forming arguments with strong, well-supported theses.

How to improve argumentation

- Learn how to read and critique academic articles: read non-linearly and hunt for the article's research question, thesis, logic, and empirics.
- *Reflect*: what counts as evidence in my discipline? Inductive or deductive techniques.
- Brainstorm a few research questions for a single topic. Choose one, answer it, and determine how to support it (logic and evidence) for that RQ.
- When writing, use the core argument as a writing guide; the paper follows the argument. Ask a question and then answer it. Include supports. No more, no less.

Finetuning SENTENCES

In English many verbs, adjectives, and adverbs have turned into abstract nouns. English sentences can become messy and pretentious, especially in sections where authors compile ideas from several sources. Furthermore, there are many borrowed words from Latin, French, and Greek. Articles with more abstract and jargon-heavy language tend to receive fewer citations (Warren et al., 2021).

Trade-off: While we want well-written sentences, it can be easy for academic perfectionism to manifest. There are diminishing returns to editing endlessly. This is the least important pillar.

Techniques for principled revision of sentences

Sentences are *unclear* when they are

1. Use many abstract nouns rather than verbs
2. They are "disjointed" - characters and actions split from one another
3. Use jargon or technical language

Rewrite technique: the subjects of the sentence contain the *cast of characters*, and the verbs contain those characters' *crucial actions*.

Recommended reading:

Style Towards Clarity and Grace, ch. 1-3

Host summer writing retreats 30 minutes daily writing

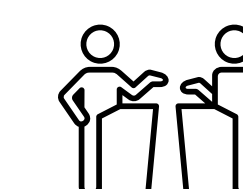
Separate creative and critical writing modes

writing → any research activity



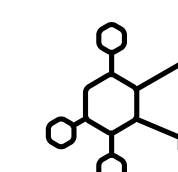
Group writing workshops

Non-linearly read and critique articles



Break down arguments

Brainstorm many RQs from a topic



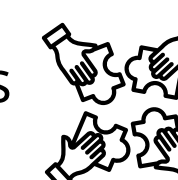
Recommended reading

Grad School Essentials ch. 1-3, Writing for Scholars ch. 5-6, Craft of Research



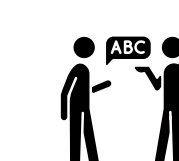
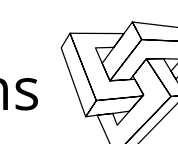
Improvement will take time and practice!

Revise sentences with others



Ask who are my "characters" and what are their actions?

Avoid abstract nouns



Avoid jargon