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Helena Suchochleb

Advice for Academic Writing

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Advice for Academic Writing

Here are some tips for academic writing that you might find useful for your work, condensed into a 3-page, 14-point “battle plan”:

#1 | Structure & Progress

Just like you don't read an entire book in a day, you don't write an entire thesis or paper in a day, either. Start with a structure that helps you to progressively work on your writing step-by-step and jot down notes for important points to remember later on. And while you certainly may make use of any writing flow, try to break down your work into smaller units during difficult times and/or when the going gets rough. A brief outline or abstract may help you with narrowing down your topic (see [#3 | Narrow Down Your Topic](#)). Establish what your central question, argument or analysis is and start off from there.

Having a good structure also pays off at the end of your writing – If you have a table of contents, a clear structure and a library or bibliography of the works you cited, you may move pieces around more easily after your final review (if need be) without losing your common thread. Also, you may always come back to your original work in later papers or books, so consider it building a foundation for your future work – The same way a house needs a strong foundation upon which it can stand, so does your work. There is a reason why “work in progress” is one of the most widely used expressions once you join the higher ranks of academia.

#2 | The Holy Trinity of Academic Writing

Here's what I preach with regard to structure – Adhere to the holy trinity of 1. question, 2. analysis (where you develop your “line of argument” by incorporating facts and evidence, weigh your arguments and illustrate them using vivid examples) and 3. synthesis with your résumé or summary including the reply to your initial question where you also give your personal assessment of the issue or topic at hand. While this is certainly great advice for academic writing, it's good to keep in mind that even within academic writing, there exist different styles and traditions, so you have some leeway. Whether you would like to start off your writing with a famous quote, an anecdote or your central questions is entirely up to you, for example. (Also, having structure in your non-academic writing pays off, too!)

#3 | Narrow Down Your Topic

While you certainly may always expand on your work, try to think what you would like to focus on in your writing. Also, ask yourself which length is appropriate for your “genre” (monography, thesis, paper, essay, professional article etc.) and whether are there any standards put forth by your university and/or academic advisor. Remember that sometimes less is more, even when your aspirations are different.



#4 | Practice Self-Interrogation

Ask yourself the following questions: Who is my readership? Depending on your “audience”, contents and style of your writing may change – and maybe also its length. Consider your readership’s or audience’s attention span – Just as for an oral presentation, keep in mind that you need to capture your audience with your writing and raise their interest in your topic.

#5 | Check Academic Writing Traditions

Expose yourself to a variety of academic writing: While some writing tends to prefer academic lingo to show off, thus producing quite dry material, other academic writing shows that good structure and being understandable can greatly enhance your work and that being entertaining and capturing your readers (also non-academic audiences) does not necessarily counter being scientific - After all, you want readers to be interested in your subject! Yes, there are differences between academic subjects but I really do think there are different academic writing traditions. While methodology is sometimes considered dry material itself, it can be more than helpful in this regard.

#6 | Hone Your Text & Writing Skills

I always tell my students that they need to develop and hone two kinds of skills with regard to their writing: 1. Being able to summarize long texts in a brief, succinct and precise fashion that is easily comprehensible for others and 2. being able to research questions and then discuss them expansively. That means most writing you are taught is either reductive or expansive in nature. Examples for reductive writing (1) would be a summary, a blurb or a brief article, while examples for expansive writing (2) would be an exam, a thesis, paper, dissertation or a reportage.

#7 | Extra Time for References & Formatting

Whether it’s your bibliography, foot or end notes, annotations and annexes or other kinds of references – Carve out some extra time to review those, as they are the basis for sound scientific work. Keep in mind that this, along with formatting, is one of the most underestimated time killers, so make sure to integrate this into your planning from the start. Depending on your academic discipline and how many references you used throughout your work, reviewing your references and your finished paper or thesis can sometimes accumulate to 50/50 in terms of hours of work. Make sure to check what kind of reference style you should use if your university or field has any standards with regard to this – If not, make sure to use one style consistently and ask yourself whether a short style featuring in-text references in brackets serves your layout better than foot or end notes. Consult academic books for reference to see how other authors have solved this problem.

#8 | Set Your Own Focus & Deadlines

Is there a deadline to submit your work? If so, can it be extended? Advice on this point can be difficult because while deadlines may paralyze some students, they can help others to set boundaries, not wander off topic and set a clear focus in their work. Unless you are working on a topic that literally no one has ever explored or written on, chances are that you will find an endless array on books to keep you busy reading for years – So identify key works and those that cover



your angle and get going. Highlighting the novel aspect of your work may likewise help you with limiting your writing after you have limited your reading. If there are no deadlines, make sure to set one for yourself.

#9 | Establish Useful Habits

Establish useful habits as much as you can (I realize this depends a lot on your other life and/or work obligations): Have a regular schedule for writing. If possible, discuss your writing with peers and/or in a colloquium for helpful feedback and input. Review only after having put your work aside for a few days to ensure you look at it with fresh eyes instead of very tired ones.

#10 | Be Inspired

If you've seen good writing or read a great paper, thesis or book, then you have a sample on which you can model your work. Many people underestimate how much knowledge and information you subconsciously take away and digest by merely reading and then transferring that into your writing. Also, ask yourself whether there is a style of writing or an author which is especially appealing to you - If so, try to find out why and what aspects you would like to integrate into your own work.

#11 | Regularly Save Your Work

I cannot stress this enough: Make sure to save your work after every major addition – Save it to an external hard disk drive in addition to your computer. Something you have devoted so much of your time, energy and resources to is valuable and should be treated accordingly.

#12 | Unwind

Even computers need downtime to run smoothly, and so does your brain - Sports or other physical activities can be great to free your mind and return to work with a clear head. Also, taking a second look at your work with some distance can do wonders sometimes! If you are at a stage in your career where you plan in years, make sure to take a vacation every now and then to reward yourself for your hard work and unwind. Travelling is a great alternative way of learning!

#13 | Get Started

Nothing can be as paralyzing as the empty white sheet of paper before you, so try to get started! Once you get started, you will develop your writing flow with more ease - and remember, you may always make changes after your final review. Plus, the more work you have put on paper, the more you will be motivated by your prior accomplishments and the easier it will be to continue.

#14 | Expand on Previous Work

Additional tip: Expanding on your previous work is a great way to increase the volume of your writing naturally - Found a fascinating topic on which you wrote an essay or article? Make that essay/article (or post, for that matter!) a paper, a thesis or a book by finding out more about said topic and becoming an expert on it!

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