

## Writing for Academic Journals

"Whether writing the first draft or the final draft, this book enables and inspires academics to develop their own writing strategies and goals."

Lorna Gillies, University of Leicester

"Our experience is that Rowena's practical approach works for busy academic staff. Not only does it enable them to increase their publication output and meet deadlines, but it boosts enthusiasm for writing and stimulates creative thinking."

Kate Morss, Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh

"This approach provides scientists with a systematic step-by-step method of producing a paper for publication. The approach streamlines the process and provides strategies for overcoming barriers. Feedback from the professionals using the approach was excellent."

Dr Mary Newton, Greater Glasgow Primary Care NHS Trust

This book unpacks the process of writing academic papers. It tells readers what good papers look like, and explains how they come to be written.

Busy academics must develop productive writing practices quickly. No one has time for trial and error. To pass external tests of research output we must write to a high standard while juggling other professional tasks. This may mean changing writing behaviours.

*Writing for Academic Journals* draws on current research and theory to provide new knowledge on writing across the disciplines. Drawing on her extensive experience of running writing workshops and working closely with academics on developing writing, Rowena Murray offers a host of practical tried and tested strategies for good academic writing.

This jargon-free, user-friendly, practical and motivational book is essential for the desk of every academic, postgraduate student and researcher for whom publication is an indicator of the quality of their work and their ability.

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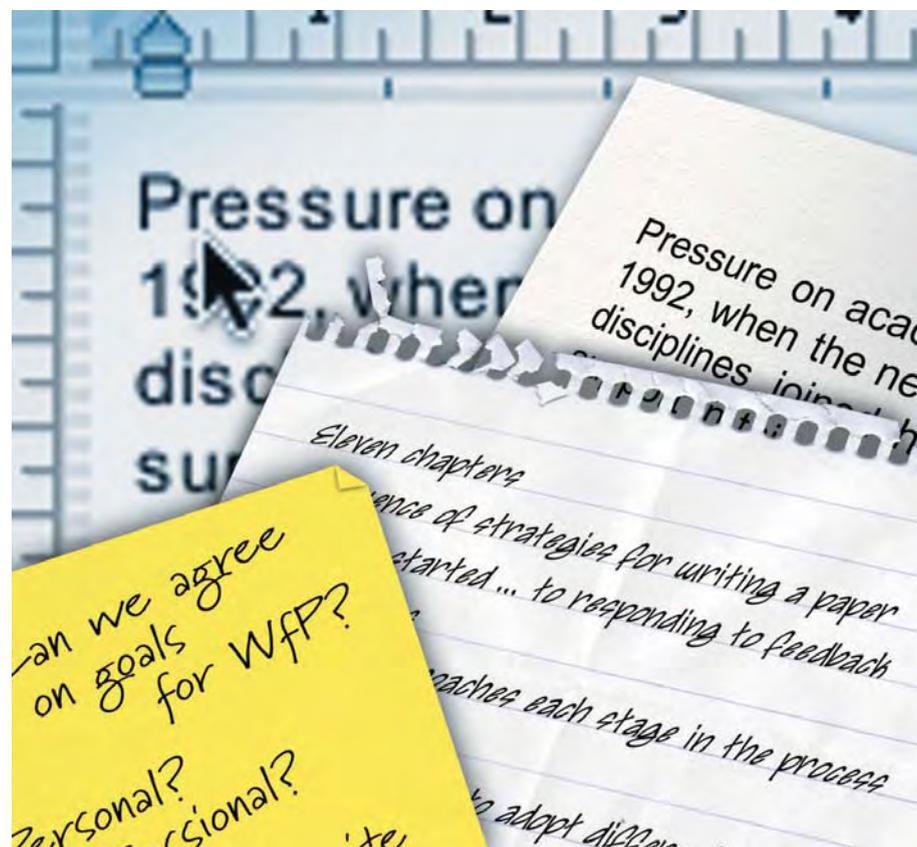
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Author of

- *How to Write a Thesis*
- *How to Survive Your Viva*

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Rowena Murray

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*Rowena Murray*

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For Phyllis



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## 2 Targeting a journal

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**'That's interesting!' • Getting to know the journals  
• Peer reviewed or professional? • Instructions for authors • Journals that 'count' • Analysing a journal  
• Working out what is acceptable • Becoming a scholar of the journal • Analysing abstracts • Defining genre  
• Joining the conversation • Cloning or creativity?  
• Mediating • Personal negotiations • Contacting the editor • Wait time • Editors' responses • Checklist**

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The key point in this chapter is that, as with any other form of communication, you have to address the needs of your audience. Of course, you will have some – or considerable – knowledge of the journals in your field from reading them over the years. But now that your intention is to write for them, you have to pay closer attention to both your target journal's instructions for authors and its published papers in order to work out what type of paper editors and reviewers are looking for.

What is acceptable can be defined in terms of what editors and reviewers have already accepted, that is, what they publish in the journal. When you write for a journal you have to find a way to bridge the gap between what you want to say and what editors and reviewers, at any point in time, want to hear.

You have to research the journals, becoming a scholar of the journals, identifying the dominant issues and conventions operating in the journal you choose to target first. It also means, as with any other aspect of research, keeping your knowledge of journals up to date.

There is, of course, information that this book cannot supply: it would be impossible to provide advice for targeting every journal in every field. What this chapter does provide is advice on how to go about becoming an expert in your target journal and, equally important, how to start writing your paper at the same time.

This is what 'instructions for authors' do not tell you: when you start to scrutinize journals for the first time, you might well find them off-putting, for many different reasons. All the more reason to develop your writing, in writing, as you go along. It is a mistake to wait until you feel sure that you can produce what the journals want before you write anything. In fact, if you have been avoiding writing for some time, that thought may be what has been stopping you.

### ***'That's interesting!'***

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'That's interesting!' may be the last thing you want to say about papers you read in academic journals. Once you have started to study them closely, you may be more tempted to say 'That's obvious', or 'That's boring', or even 'Who cares?' Yet someone found something 'interesting' – perhaps not new theory, but something sufficiently new – in every paper published in your target journal.

Some time ago, a paper with exactly this title, 'That's interesting', described research into what makes a paper 'interesting' to readers (Davis 1971). The author concluded that it is not just papers that follow a journal's lead that get published; papers that go against the grain may be even more interesting:

QUESTION: How do theories which are generally considered interesting differ from theories which are generally considered non-interesting?  
ANSWER: Interesting theories are those which deny certain assumptions of their audience, while non-interesting theories are those which affirm certain assumptions of their audience.

(Davis 1971: 309)

This does not, however, mean that the published papers studied broke all the conventions, but that they offered a clear contribution that explicitly stood out from the rest of the work in an area. Of course, you can do this while still following the conventions of your target journal; you do not have to break all the conventions in order to inject your papers with a 'that's interesting' factor.

Davis provided a useful question to help us work out what would constitute the ‘interesting’ factor at a certain point in a journal’s history: if an interesting paper attracts the attention of readers, you have to work out ‘Where was the [readers’] attention before it was engaged by the interesting?’ (p. 310). It might, in fact, be valuable, if you have not already developed this knowledge, to learn about the types of ‘interest’ represented in a recent selection of issues of your target journal over the past year or so. This analysis would give you a very real understanding of what is – and is not – likely to be published in that journal.

A further implication of Davis’s argument is that you should have developed not only your knowledge of your subject, but also ‘an intense familiarity’ (p. 337) with your audience’s assumptions about your subject:

- What does your audience assume about your subject?
- Which aspect of your subject do they assume is still open to question?
- Which aspect of your subject do they assume is not open to question?
- Will you challenge either of these assumptions in your paper?

On the other hand, you have to be wary when certain areas are branded as important for research and writing, careful that these areas do not lock you out of other areas that are equally worthy of research, areas that you might have an interest in researching.

Nor is there only one way of being ‘interesting’, of challenging existing thinking in a rational and well-argued way. Nor can you avoid the task of making the case that your work is as interesting as you imply it is or in precisely the way you say it is.

Your job, as a writer for academic journals, is to work out what constitutes the ‘That’s interesting’ factor specific to your target journal, noting exactly how that quality is put into words. If you do not find any of the papers interesting, you may have to revise your definition of what constitutes ‘interest’ for this context. You may have to admit – at least to yourself – that you have a different set of criteria. You may even have to review your understanding of what constitutes publishable work.

### ***Getting to know the journals***

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In order to choose a journal, there is probably no way of avoiding having a look at them all. Browse the journals in your field. Identify the types of journal. For example, Blaxter et al. (1998a) define six types: popular, professional, applied, academic, multi-disciplinary and electronic (p. 150). Is there the same range in your field? Do you have all these options?

You can develop a profile of the journals in your field. Rank them in order of status. Some would say that you should aim for the top-ranked academic

journal with your first papers, but that clearly depends on the quality of your work, the extent to which it is considered relevant by your research community and, perhaps, other factors specific to your discipline.

Are there articles published in some of the journals to which you could refer in your paper? This would make a direct connection between your work and that of the journal. Starting with this question is not 'cheating'; it makes you begin to read a few papers with the eye of a writer, rather than as a reader.

You would have to make explicit the connections between your work and the work of other published authors, showing how you are taking the work forward, complementing it or taking the field in a different direction. Thinking this way may already begin to shape your paper. Or you could be drawing up a list of possible topics.

More specifically, browse the titles of the papers published. Think about how you might package your work in one of these types of titles. Examine a few types of title in detail. For example, you may find that some titles are definitive, while others are more tentative or propositional. Some signal what type of paper it is – such as a review paper or research paper. Others foreground methodology. Then there is the title-plus-subtitle option, allowing two types of heading to be combined in one; perhaps there is a topical title before the colon and something more 'dull' or descriptive after the colon. Is this used in your target journal? Other possibilities – though you may have other ways of describing them, appropriate to your discipline – include the descriptive, allusive, elusive, humorous, ironic, topical, generic, specific, alliterative, ambiguous, puns and titles using quotations. Some of these, you will know already, would not fit at all in any of your journals. Some of them will seem to you useless. Write yourself a short list of options you are prepared to consider.

### **Writing activity**

A key writing task at this stage is to write several different working titles for your paper.

This is not just about making it up, pretending to write a paper, but about beginning, with an appropriately modest goal, the process of writing a paper. Of course, your title will change, possibly many times, as you write, but, on the other hand if you choose a title that will fit easily into your target journal's agenda, then you may find that you have a useful focus for the rest of your writing process. Moreover, by writing a working title, you are, it has been argued, creating a link between your developing identity – as a writer – and the titles of your works: 'the titles of published papers also help to frame an academic's public identity' (Blaxter et al. 1998a: 147). Your titles may be

an initial expression of your developing identity. Once you see them in writing, you may realize what that means in a way that is not possible if you simply keep possible topics running around in your head.

Over the longer term, it is worth thinking about creating a pattern of titles in your papers, if this works with the range of journals you target: 'it is worth giving some attention to the ways [the title] may contribute to creating a sense of cohesion across . . . several research projects' (Blaxter et al. 1998a: 147). This helps you to develop a body of work, a profile and a focus in your chosen area. You may find it helpful to read whichever of the many books on writing for journals in specific disciplines relates to your field, such as Sternberg's (2000) *Guide to Publishing in Psychology Journals*.

As you begin more and more to look at the journals as a prospective writer, you can also be thinking about your options. Take time to think – and, above all, write about – your developing ideas, however half-formed or half-baked they seem to you.

Read a selection of papers from your potential targets and try to define and distinguish the 'spin' or argument of each. Think about how it positions the writer and reader. Are there any ways in which you can adjust the 'spin' of your paper? It might be a mistake to use the word 'spin' here, since it has particular associations, but it is used here to mean adjusting your argument and to characterize the scale of that adjustment. It need not always be a huge adjustment.

For example, if you want to write a critique of current developments, methods or concepts, as many new writers do, you could well end up by putting your head above the parapet, drawing too much fire, being too critical, or over-relying on your own perspective and motivation. An alternative could be to make the case – and write your article around the argument – that lessons could be learned or should be learned about the subject. This is a more positive line of argument. It can mean that you can write about the very same topic, but from a different, more positive perspective. Another alternative might be to argue that future developments should take into account, or be founded on, even partly, lessons learned from the past. Or you could argue that while lessons have been learned, there are underlying issues that have not yet been resolved. You might want to question whether lessons have been learned from the past or suggest that those lessons have been influenced by certain factors, results or approaches. Can you connect your perspective to a different set of factors, results or approaches? In other words, you do not need to turn your field on its head in order to critique it. This type of adjustment of the overall pitch of your argument can sometimes more quickly be achieved in discussion with colleagues, perhaps in a writers' group (see Chapter 8).

This type of topic is a popular one among new writers, who see – and feel – the need for change and have that as a focus and motivation for their writing. There is no need to abandon this focus; rather, there should be a moment in which you consider how to convert it into a reasoned argument. Above all, write about it, in any form, before it slips away. This subject may be one of your prime motivators to write. If you lose that, you may decide not to write. You

may, of course, decide, after looking at the available journals, that this is not for you, that you would rather devote your time to other types of writing or to other professional tasks. But this decision would, at this stage, be based on a partial analysis of the field. There is more analysis to be done before you really know what is expected of you as a writer for a particular journal.

### ***Peer reviewed or professional?***

New writers often spend a fair amount of time debating the pros and cons of publishing in 'academic' or 'professional' journals. The academic journals, they argue, will reach a minute readership, while professional journals will convey their ideas to the people who can implement them. At this point I usually ask the question, 'How many papers have you published in this or that journal?', and the answer is 'none'. In other words, there is a quantity of informal knowledge about these two types of journal that is not based on experience or even on hearsay.

This is not to say that new writers are lacking in ability, but that they have often formed fixed beliefs about journals and readers that can inhibit their motivation to write. Although this discussion is a crucial moment in a writer's development – without it they may never overcome their resistance to writing for academic journals – it can lead to a block.

It is important to see the value in both types of journal and to consider, over the longer term, whether you could or should publish in both. 'Academic or practitioner' is, therefore, less a dilemma than a set of rhetorical choices. In practice, there are journals in some fields that bring the two together:

<b><i>Academic</i></b>	<b><i>Professional</i></b>	<b><i>Both</i></b>
• Research	Practice	Study of practice generates new knowledge
• Small audience	Large audience	Mixed
• Values theory	Values experience	Researches experience

You can probably identify the journals in your field that combine 'theory' and 'practice'. This may involve you in updating some of your assumptions about what constitutes an academic subject.

In practice, however, this discussion of choice has to be much more specific to your subject area, and this would be a good topic for you to write about now, even using the informality of style and writing in the first person singular in order to explore what you really think:

**Writing activity**

- What experience can I draw on?
- What do I want to analyse?
- What is the underlying theory?
- What theory can I relate my work to?
- What new perspective do I want to bring?
- How can I relate that to others' perspectives?

Practitioner journals may have less status, particularly if they do not use peer review. It is worth checking, however, whether this traditional distinction still applies to the journals you are considering.

You may see the low/high status decision as a kind of 'stepping stone' model: aim for journals with less status first and work your way up to the higher ones later. Being strategic about where you publish is not just about matching what you want to say with what they currently print; it may be much more about having outputs that count. Frequently, new writers have enough material for both types of journal, but they do not realize it. Hence the need for some deep discussion with more experienced writers about your potential publications. You do not have to limit yourself to one type of journal, and you may argue that this is not a healthy, motivating strategy in any case: 'it is dangerous for us to allow academic institutions to remain the primary site where our ideas are developed and exchanged' (hooks 1999: 140).

Remember that there is plenty of information about journals, about their impact factors, half-lives and the role of citations indices in establishing a journal's status. If you are not sure what these terms mean, or doubt whether they are even used in your field, enlist the help of a librarian. Librarians know all the latest information sources and can probably teach you a thing or two about writing for publication in your field. At the very least, they can probably update your literature searching.

***Instructions for authors***

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Many editors report that, incredible though it seems, writers often ignore their journals' written requirements. This section is here to spell out the point, however obvious, that you must follow the instructions for authors to the letter.

**What not to do**

- Invent your own referencing style, use the wrong one or provide incomplete references.
- Go well over the word limit.
- Omit abstract/summary, author biography or other requested elements.
- Submit your paper single-spaced or double-sided.

Instead, use the recommended style manual or the journal's house style. Of course, you probably know all this already, and cannot believe that an astonishing number of writers do not follow the journal's guidelines. If you need any further motivation, some editors claim that they will not even consider papers that do not follow their guidelines.

Another part of your 'instructions' as a writer is the journal's aims and scope. Unlike the guidelines for presentation, these are open to interpretation. If possible, talk to someone who has been published in the journal recently and try to develop an understanding of how these aims are being delivered in practice.

There may be other important requirements for submissions, such as ethical approval, statement of potential conflicts of interest and any financial support you have had for the work you are writing about.

***Journals that 'count'***

Who decides on the status of the journals? In some countries, such as South Africa, there is a list of journals that academics have to publish in, if their publications are to count. However, that list may change from time to time. Writers have to know how to keep up with such processes.

Some journals will count in research audits, some do not. Some count for more than others. This might depend on the scale being used in your system or institution. You can always check the citations index for your discipline to determine a journal's status:

Citations have three merits: they reflect the view of the international community rather than that of a small expert panel; they are objective and transparent; and they are immune to grade inflation. Drawbacks include bias towards established researchers and against excellent work in obscure fields. Poor work may sometimes be cited in order to correct it.

(Smith and Eysenck 2002: 15)

You may not agree that citation counts are so important in measuring the status of publications, but you will have to acknowledge that others see them as a kind of 'gold standard'.

Of course, it should not just be your publications that count; it would be nice if you could get some credit for making what is, for some, the not insignificant effort of starting to write, for, as one institution sees it, 'getting off zero'. At the University of Swinburne Business School, for example, there is a system of rewarding those who take early steps, such as joining a writers' group. While many systems reward the successful writer, others reward those who are getting started.

In some disciplines, and at some times, it is difficult to get a definite answer to the question of a journal's status. Be ready for a confrontation with different value systems as you research this question. One academic's top journal is another's *Journal of Insignificant Studies*.

- Ask the editor – editors know about citations indices.
- Review citations indices yourself – ask the librarians.
- Check web sites of top-rated departments: where do they publish?
- Look up web sites of those you read and admire: where do they publish?

This list suggests that, rather than waiting to be told what to do, you should take an active role in researching the journal. In the absence, in some fields, of definite answers about the relative status of journals, you will have to use several different types of information to make the choice about the one you want to target first.

### ***Analysing a journal***

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In the same vein, there are other features of the journal itself that you would do well to analyse in some detail. Again, this is not to say that you are a complete novice, if you already read the journals; instead, the point is to develop your knowledge of the journal further through systematic analysis.

#### **How to analyse a journal**

- 1 Read the full instructions for authors.  
Some journals only publish an extract in certain issues.  
Check the web site. Read/print titles and abstracts.
- 2 Skim and scan last few issues for topics and treatments:  
which topics appear most often and how are they treated?  
How can you adapt your material to suit the journal's agenda?

- 3 List the headings and sub-headings used in two or three papers.  
How are the papers divided up: number of words per section, proportion of whole paper?
- 4 Which methodologies or theoretical frameworks are used?  
How long, and how defined, is that section of each paper?
- 5 Discuss your analysis with experienced, published writers in your field, preferably those who have been published in your target journal recently.  
Ask them: 'Are the editors/reviewers likely to go for a paper about . . .?'

Look at how structure is signalled in each paper. Even in short articles, there are versions of the generic structure of academic writing – rationale, aims, methods, results, meanings, though not always in these exact terms – but in what form for your target journal?

### How the structure of the article is signalled

At Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals NHS Trust we have been rolling out a programme in which . . .  
 The key components of the US programme were: . . .  
 . . . of 441 patients who contributed to the survey  
 This illustrated that . . .  
 The findings suggested that . . .  
 The infection control team . . . to disseminate . . .  
 . . . it was decided to roll out . . .  
 Learning points [heading]  
 The success of the programme . . .  
 This programme is not a panacea . . .  
 What we have done . . . is not in itself new . . .  
 . . . is not the whole answer, but . . . is a big part of the solution.  
 J. Storr (2000) Hand in hand, *Nursing Times*, 96(25): 28–9

Note the clever qualification, at the end, of the significance of the findings: 'not a panacea . . . not in itself new . . . not the whole answer, but . . . part of the solution' – is this the kind of thing you find in your target journal? Will you have to write this kind of qualification on or weighted judgement of your work in this, or in some other, way?

Develop a profile for each journal, reviewing it from time to time. You will have internalized a lot of this information, but it can help to make your observations explicit. You can then check them against others' observations.

Taking this type of analytical approach can also help you to move beyond scepticism about the journals' agenda; for example, as you take a closer look at what is going on in the papers, you might see that they are not all as narrowly circumscribed as you think they are. More importantly, once you have defined more specifically the range of types of paper, you will probably find that you are already generating ideas for how you will shape your paper.

You – perhaps along with colleagues or in a writer's group – can analyse a journal in some detail by looking at how the arguments are articulated across all the abstracts in one issue:

### **Analysing every paper in one issue of your target journal: example**

#### ***British Journal of Educational Technology, 32(1), 2001***

##### **1 Ford & Chen**

Starts with 'This paper + verb': 'This paper presents results'.

Followed by specifics of the study.

Results take up the bulk of the abstract.

Key word at start of sentence: '*Significant* differences in'

Implications in second-last sentence in propositional style: 'The findings provide support for the notion that'.

Last sentence refers to future research, but is not specific.

##### **2 Pedler**

Starts with background/context statement in general terms.

'This paper + verb' comes second: 'This paper examines'.

This structure is also used in sentences 3 and 4: 'It first describes . . . It then presents . . . and finds that'.

Sentence on findings included.

Implications stated as a proposal statement, minus the phrase, 'The findings suggest': 'Spellcheckers need to use'.

##### **3 Morris**

Starts with 'This paper describes'.

Method is described in general terms: 'A summative evaluation study'.

'However': good link word to signal balance of interpretation.

'The implication of this research outcome is considered', but not specified.

##### **4 Holsbrink-Engels**

General opening statement.

Almost half the abstract is background.

General statements in the continuous present tense.

Then 'The results are described': good sentence variation, but too cryptic?

Explicitly signals 'The main conclusion'.

Wordy (in my view): 'is considered as having the potential to assist'.

### **5 Sandberg, Christoph & Emans**

Change of style: 'In this article we'.

Uses narrative structure, with time words: 'First we established . . . Then the requirements were . . . description . . . evaluations . . . Conclusions'.

Pros and cons of findings referred to, not specified.

### **6 Salmon**

Starts with 'This paper describes and discusses critically'.

Claims study is 'unique' in first line.

'Useful lessons' learned from the study are semi-specified.

The next step is, of course, to analyse a whole paper in your target journal. Once you have decided what type of paper you want to write, choose one of that type and take it apart. Work out exactly how it is constructed and how that construction is signalled in words. What stylistic choices and rhetorical devices are used here?

The following two examples are from the Manufacturing Strategy: Operations Strategy in a Global Context Conference (London Business School 1996).

## **Analysing an abstract: example 1**

### **Neely et al. 'Developing and Testing a Process for Performance Measurement System Design**

#### **Abstract**

- First word is '**Traditionally**'.
- Second sentence defines problem with 'tradition': '**Dissatisfaction** with these traditional . . . systems'.
- Scope of this dissatisfaction?: 'widespread'.
- The solution?: 'balanced scorecard . . . in an attempt to overcome **this problem**'.
- Link with next sentence, and next step in this mini-argument: 'For **such** frameworks to be of practical use'.
- The research question: 'the process . . . **has to be understood**'.

- Aim of this paper is to research the process: '**This paper documents** . . . which has sought to understand this process'.
- **Focusing** on 'methodological issues' [that is, *not* the whole study].

### **Introduction**

Each element is developed in the introduction, for example, 'Dissatisfaction' is developed in 'short-termism . . . lack . . . fail . . . encourage [a negative] . . . minimise . . . fail'.

Note how the sequence of ideas is signalled in topic sentences:

- 1 '**Traditionally** businesses have used financially oriented measures of performance, derived from criteria such as DuPont's return on investment (ROI).'
- 2 'The main performance measurement tool of **today** is undoubtedly the balanced scorecard.'
- 3 '**The paper begins by explaining** how the authors developed a process for performance measurement system design through a programme of collaborative action research.'

Notice the use of the three-part sentence structure:

'The paper **provides** justification for these research questions, **demonstrates** how the researchers collected and analysed the necessary data, **and documents** the learning that ensued.'

The authors forecast the elements of paper; they define the function of each section in advance. Note links between this forecast and the headings and topic sentences that follow:

'The paper begins by explaining how the authors **developed a process** . . .'

### **'DEVELOPING THE PROCESS'**

#### **Background literature**

Use of listing: '. . . three main steps. The first involves . . . The second encompasses . . . The third focuses . . .'

Use of author's name + date + verb in summary of literature, for example 'Wisner and Fawcett (1991) also assume . . .'

#### **Developing the process**

Two graphics placed together for comparison, but no detailed comparison done.

**Testing the process**

As throughout this paper, listing:

'Maskell (1998) offers the following seven principles of . . .' (p. 472).

'It was decided that to answer this question comprehensively, five research questions had to be addressed' (p. 475, para 1).

Note use of sentence variation:

'The learning from the two clubs was quite different' (p. 476, line 1).

**Conclusion**

Strong statement of what has been achieved:

'This paper has demonstrated how a process . . . was developed.'

**Analysing an abstract: example 2****Voss et al. 'Learning, Benchmarking, and Manufacturing Performance'**

- Statement of result in abstract: 'The results **show**'.
- **Definitions** at the start.
- Statement of research **gap**: 'This paper addresses that gap by . . .' (p. 689).
- **'In this paper, we focus on two** mechanisms. . . First, . . . Second, . . .'
- Substantial theoretical review, pp. 689–90.
- Passive voice in methodology section:  
'A structured interview was used to gather the data . . . Data were gathered . . . respondents were asked . . . questions were taken' (p. 691).
- Forecasting: 'Each is further defined below' (p. 691).
- Short (compacted?) statement: 'Thus, Optimism Index is expected to be negatively related to Performance' (p. 691).
- Language of work-in-progress: 'We expect . . . therefore we expect . . . This leads to our first research proposition . . . are likely to be . . . we predict . . .' (p. 692).
- Highlights outcome: '**This study clearly points to** a link between . . . The results of the regression analysis show . . .' (p. 693).
- Conclusion highlights implications for theory and practice.

If you find this analysis too detailed, you will have to find some other way of establishing the type of paper that you have to write. The value of the analysis is that it defines your task. Without it, you may have no more than a generalized idea of what form your paper should take. This will mean that you have to

develop the form as you go along, with none of the certainty that this type of analysis provides. As you write, you will not know whether your paper will meet the journal's expectations. This additional uncertainty may undermine your confidence as you write and may even stop you completing and submitting your paper.

### ***Working out what is acceptable***

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What is acceptable might be quite narrow in some journals and quite wide in others. Some journals have only two or three types of article; others have several types: 'conventional academic articles . . . research notes, viewpoints, work in progress, responses to previously published articles, review articles, autobiographical pieces and poems' (Blaxter et al. 1998a: 146).

Although it is contentious, the case can be made that you can define what is acceptable for publishing in your target journal in terms of what has been accepted, although there are, of course, exceptions in some fields: 'Many of the more recently established journals . . . allow for and even encourage less conventional kinds of writing' (Blaxter et al. 1998a: 146).

You may find that you resist or reject this approach to targeting. You may even be uncomfortable with the idea of targeting. Yet this is what constitutes effective writing – writing that persuades its audience – and it also, it has to be emphasized, defines the work you have to do.

### ***Becoming a scholar of the journal***

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You can take the analytical and targeting processes one step further, making your study of the journal as thorough as your study of your field. It might even help to put aside your current 'reading knowledge' of your journal, and look at the journal as if it were in another area.

You already know the journals. The purpose of this section is to argue that you could and should know them better. You certainly will have absorbed subconsciously certain features of their style, structure and layout, in the course of reading articles for content, but what you need now is an analysis of the writing.

My use of the word 'scholar' is quite deliberate; it is not enough, I would argue, to 'familiarize yourself' with the conventions; that is an important process, but you can bring your considerable analytical ability to all the features of academic writing, not just its conventions. After all, once you have studied the conventions, how will that produce appropriate writing?

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This argument is not targeted solely at those writing outside their own fields:

Because disciplines vary, you should familiarize yourself with the conventions of the field in which you are publishing. If this is the field in which you have done most of your research, you probably have absorbed such conventions subliminally. You will have to make a special effort, though, if you are writing in an area outside your usual territory.

(Luey 2002: 10)

In any case, if you are writing your first journal paper you are, in a sense, doing exactly that. This argument is aimed at writers staying within their own 'territory' who may therefore assume that they know enough already, when more detailed knowledge would improve their chances of communicating with their readers.

If you take a research approach to understanding your target journal, you might even go as far as to conducting a mini-survey of its readers:

... start by conducting a small, informal survey among members of your intended audience to see who really would like to know what you're planning to tell, and what the general level of ignorance is. Then you can avoid alienating readers either by dishing up background they already have or beginning your discussion on too advanced a plane.

(Appelbaum 1998: 71)

Even if you think this is going too far, or wasting valuable time that could be spent writing, you can see the sense in trying out the idea for your paper with real people. An added benefit is that it works as a rehearsal of your paper, making you articulate the main message and perhaps thereby clarifying one or two points. The trick would be to capture the sentences that seem to make most sense to the potential reader by writing them down. If you don't, you will be potentially starting all over again when you finally do sit down to write, and, more importantly, you may have lost the essential focus on audience.

Even if you think that having material that is 'too advanced' is unlikely, there may be other adjustments that you need to make. You may, for example, be thinking about your subject on too esoteric a plane. Discussion will show you where you have to make adjustments. Whether you actually make them all or not is, of course, a complicated decision in itself. This is where writing – rather than just thinking – can help you to clarify your purpose. The kind of writing that works well at this stage need not necessarily be 'academic'; paradoxically, it is sometimes best to work in quite un-academic ways (see Chapter 3).

## *Analysing abstracts*

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This section is about learning to look for the shapes of argument that a journal has accepted recently. It is also about seeing the patterns that occur across disciplines: problematizing sentences, methods for approaching the problem, contingent answers to your chosen question and so on. Abstracts begin with what is known, then move to what is not known and needs to be researched, then to the justification of the work done, followed by the argument that it needed to be done and so on.

Three abstracts from one field – probably, deliberately, not your own – are analysed in some detail in this section. If you think the field of academic writing – as an area of research in itself – is likely to be narrow, wait until you see the range of current research and the different journals in which it is published. This means that in this area – as in many others – different types of writing are available to writers, but for any paper they are writing, they have to carefully match their research and writing with the journal they are targeting at any particular time.

These examples also illustrate an important point for new writers, touched on in an earlier section: if you can adjust the pitch of your argument you can write about your topic in different ways for different journals. In doing this, you do not just re-hash your material, but develop it in new ways, sometimes even taking your thinking or research in a new direction. These abstracts deal with different kinds of research; yet you could write about the topic in different ways without always doing new and different research. In fact, it may be essential to do so in order to truly test and develop your ideas.

Although higher education is not your field, there is a purpose to this exercise for other disciplines: this section shows the kind of analysis that you need to do on abstracts in your area. Doing this analysis outside your area, in the first instance, is a good way to avoid being distracted by the articles' content. Since you might not care too much about the content of the papers in my selection, you can focus more on the analytical approach I am demonstrating and arguing that you should adopt yourself.

Perhaps more importantly, although this activity is meant to be analytical, it often draws out academics' personal preferences. Some people just do not like certain styles of writing. Of course, there is nothing wrong with that in itself, as long as you put your stylistic preferences on hold in order to produce the type of writing that is acceptable to your target journal.

The first abstract begins with a good example of that clever rhetorical device, the 'uncontentious opener', marked in bold. The opening sentence problematizes an issue without drawing too much fire. While it makes a sweeping statement, the terms are general enough to stay on the right side of overstatement and familiar enough not to require references at the end of the sentence. The

case is made for the work conducted without critiquing the work of other researchers.

### Abstract 1: the review paper

**During the last two decades the higher education system in the UK has moved from an élite to a mass orientation, while academic careers have become less secure and more demanding, and a greater accountability has been imposed upon the system.** In the light of these changes, it is appropriate to ask what is known about the nature of academic work. For the purposes of this article, academic work has been conceptualised as involving one or more of five overlapping roles: the commonplace triumvirate of teaching, research and managing, plus writing and networking. **The existing literature** on each of these roles, and on academic careers in general, **is reviewed**. At the time of writing, there was **no single comprehensive text available** on academic work in the UK. While much has been written in recent years on the teaching role (and, to a lesser extent, managing) **relatively little** of a cross-disciplinary nature **appears** to have been written on academic researching, writing or networking. **The future development of** these, and other, areas of writing on academic careers, **is considered**.

177 words

Blaxter et al. (1998b) Writing on academic careers, *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(3): 281–95

The second sentence creates a brilliant, economical shift of gear from context to the work reported in the paper: ‘In the light of these changes, it is appropriate to ask’. The authors do not say, ‘We have to consider’ – which would be much more debatable – nor do they propose that this is a neglected area of study. This is also relatively uncontentious: in many fields, it is indeed always ‘appropriate to ask what is known about’ many subjects. This is an excellent way of introducing a review paper. The authors build a solid foundation for the sentence, ‘The existing literature . . . is reviewed’, so that their review develops logically from the context.

One statement in this abstract often strikes academics as overstated – ‘no single comprehensive text available’ – yet, on closer examination, we see that while it might be foolish to claim that ‘no text was available’, what the authors have said is that there is no ‘single comprehensive’ text, a claim that is not as extreme as it first seems. Likewise, ‘relatively little’ qualifies the statement ‘little has been written on’, as the authors suggest merely that there could be more work in this area. The word ‘appears’ prevents the authors from sounding

too categorical in their assertion – a standard device in academic writing, by means of which authors acknowledge that much of what they are saying is open to debate.

Finally, what the authors provide that is new is described only in the most general of terms – ‘the future development of . . . is considered’. We are not told the outcome of their review, analysis and ‘consideration’. For some readers, this is unsatisfying; they want to know whether or not it is worth their while reading this paper, and they make that judgement based on the abstract. However, the fact remains that this paper was published and therefore was judged adequate in its present form. This is not to say that no papers published in this journal ever specify the outcome of the research in the abstract, but it does mean that this is an option, whether or not every writer would choose to write that way.

The purpose of this analysis is to make two points, particularly for new writers:

- 1 There are established rhetorical devices that can be used in many disciplines to set up and develop academic arguments.
- 2 If you analyse abstracts you will learn what these are in your discipline.

This abstract is particularly relevant to new writers, including postgraduate students who are extremely well placed to write review papers: they are at the cutting edge of research in their areas and are up to date with the literature. Since they normally have to review the literature, in some form, in any case, writing a review paper will not take them too far from the writing of a thesis.

In the second example – same subject of research on academic writing, same field of higher education – the writer does more work to establish that there is a gap in the literature.

### **Abstract 2: defining the research gap**

**A review of literature on released-time programs shows a trend away from uncritical acceptance. Emerging skepticism** about released time from teaching or service **stems from a lack of evidence supporting** its usefulness and from the mixed messages it gives about the value of teaching. **Four demonstrational experiments** confirm that skepticism by **showing that (1)** verified assessments of normal work loads contradict faculty claims of being too busy for additional scholarship; **(2)** faculty given released time usually persist in old habits; **(3)** new faculty showed no obvious benefits of a typical released-time program; and **(4)** faculty in released-time programs verbalized real doubts about how to use extra time for meaningful scholarship. **A fifth experiment suggests an**

**alternative to** traditional released-time programs: faculty who claimed too little time for regular scholarship learned to produce significant amounts by finding time for brief, daily writing sessions.

142 words

Boice, R. (1987) Is released time an effective component of faculty development programs?, *Research in Higher Education*, 26(3): 311–26

The opening sentence, ‘A review of literature on . . . shows a trend away from [or towards]’, is one we could all write regularly. This is not to say, of course, that we should all plagiarize this paper, or any published writing. The point is that there is a limited range of rhetorical techniques that work in each discipline, and a limited number of ways of saying that your work needed to be done. What is interesting about this variation is that the author did not write, ‘**There is** a trend away from’, but rooted his assertion in literature, or at least the review of it, which ‘shows’ such a trend.

‘Emerging skepticism’ develops the point that such programmes are no longer viewed uncritically, while the term ‘released time’ is given more definition. This sentence also identifies that ubiquitous trigger for research: ‘lack of evidence’. It is logical to assume that if we had more evidence of effect, we might be more willing to consider a programme. It is a useful, reasonable and recognizable argument for research.

The essential link between the literature, and the question it leaves unanswered, on the one hand, and the author’s research, on the other, is implied, rather than made explicit: ‘Four demonstrational experiments’. The link between the statement of the need for the work and the beginning of the description of it is made by repeating the word ‘skepticism’. Like the first example, this abstract tells us nothing about the author’s methodology. We do not know how the ‘experiments’ were conducted, or how the data were analysed. Yet, clearly, this was judged appropriate for publication in the journal at the time of publication.

Some academic readers like the listing and numbering – 1, 2, 3, 4 – of research outcomes. It makes for a very long sentence (66 words), but each element of the list follows the same pattern, making reading easier. Yet many feel relief when the last sentence breaks the pattern with ‘A fifth experiment’. Others find the style very difficult. Whether or not you like this style, the point is that there are certain recognizable, generic rhetorical manoeuvres that Boice used that you will see, in different guises, in your field. Again, the main point is that the paper was judged acceptable by the reviewers and editors.

Finally, a third example – same discipline, same research area, different journal – shows a different approach. There is no contextualizing opening sentence, uncontentious or otherwise; instead, we go straight into a description of the study.

### Abstract 3: straight to the study

**Three different two-day thesis writing courses were designed and evaluated. Forty-one** graduate research students completed a product-centred course which taught grammatical and stylistic rules for good research writing. **Thirty** students completed a cognitive strategies course which introduced heuristics for generating and organising thesis content. **Thirty-three** students completed a generative writing and shared revision course which entailed the production of an unplanned draft followed by extensive revision on the basis of reviewing by peers. **All three courses** were well received by the students, **but** those who attended the product-centred and generative writing courses **showed significantly greater improvements** in productivity than did the students who attended the cognitive strategies course. **These findings suggest that** short writing courses **can be of benefit** in teaching research writing to graduate students **but** that such courses should focus directly on the production of text rather than on strategies for generating and organising information and ideas prior to composing.

152 words

Torrance et al. (1993) Training in thesis writing: an evaluation of three conceptual orientations, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 63: 170–84.

Knowing from the first word of the first sentence that we are about to find out about three studies, we then follow a pattern of reports on each, as each of the subsequent sentences starts with a number, again setting up a pattern. Unlike abstract 2 (Boice), with all its results presented in one long sentence, here each result has a sentence. A synthesizing sentence, beginning 'All three courses', neatly pulls them together and makes a positive statement about them, quickly qualified in 'but'.

'These findings suggest that' is another generic phrase which we will probably all write at some time. Certainly, there is no avoiding the word 'suggest' in academic writing, particularly at the conclusion of academic argument, implying as it does the process of interpretation – rather than proof – so important in research.

We would all probably be happy to say that our work led to 'significantly greater improvements' in our field (whether or not that means statistically 'significant' will, of course, have to be clarified, but not, obviously, for abstracts in this particular journal). Some form of branding of your paper's 'contribution' will be required for some journals: does your work contribute something 'new', 'fresh' or something that 'can be of benefit'? How are contributions described in your field – exactly which words are used in the closing

sentences of abstracts and conclusions in journals in your field? Significantly, in this third example, the claim to a contribution is qualified, again in the word ‘but’, so that the authors not only clarify their claim but also do not appear to claim too much. Is this current practice in your target journal?

These three examples show the range of rhetorical choices made by writers in one discipline. Although the three are, in some ways, quite different, there is not an infinite variety across any one field; if you study your journals in this way, you will have a better understanding of how successful, accepted papers are put together. Without that understanding, how will you make your rhetorical choices? If you become a scholar of abstracts in your own discipline, conducting this level of analysis, then you are more likely genuinely to have learned about how writing is produced in your discipline’s journals. If you are not a scholar of your journals, how will you make all your writing decisions? – confusingly, some will be straightforward, but others may be shots in the dark.

### **What we can learn from studying abstracts**

- How to write uncontentious openers
- How to make the case for your work
- How to link what is known/not known and your work
- How much to write about your methodology
- How much detail to give of your results
- How to define your contribution

You can use recurring phrases – or what almost seem like ‘catchphrases’ at times – as prompts for your writing. They need not be a constraining factor in the expression of your own ideas in your own voice. However, if you decide you do not need to write regularly – see Chapter 7 – then you may find this analysis inhibiting or even insulting. Others will immediately see the point of understanding the rhetorical norms of writing in their journals, even seeing it as learning the ‘formula’ for a specific journal. Wherever you stand in this debate, you can surely at least see the sense in working out what your audience – editors and reviewers – have judged acceptable in the recent past.

### ***Defining genre***

There are distinctive ways of thinking, stating ideas, and constructing and pacing arguments in each academic discipline. There are what could be called sub-genres within disciplines, represented by or within different journals.

There are also features of the genres of academic writing that appear across disciplinary boundaries. These can be considered generic features of academic writing.

I thought this was a relatively uncontentious position until I was vigorously challenged by a scientist who strongly disagreed: 'How can you say that there are such generic features? How do you know? What is your evidence?' The fact that we were, at the time, analysing examples from his and other disciplines which included similar features did not make him see it that way. This is not to say that he was being obtuse, but the strength of his reaction was interesting. Some academics are so invested in the distinctiveness of their discipline that they feel they can learn nothing from the others, that there are no commonalities and that we are wasting their time talking about the genre of academic writing because each discipline is different. Can it really be true that his discipline was so distinctive from all the others that no comparisons could be drawn?

This is what I have come to call the 'tribal' response. Meaning no disrespect to anyone or to any discipline, I want to make the point that while it is crucial to study the genre of your discipline, it is equally important to learn about the generic forms available to all disciplines. Later in this book examples from different disciplines are used to illustrate effective strategies in academic arguments. Will you only read those from your own discipline?

It is probably important to warn new writers that, even as you learn about genre, there may be others in your discipline who think like our colleague mentioned above. They may think that you are just being naïve, that you still do not really know what is going on in journals in your field, that you are just too new to the game. Some may even think that you are proving too slow at picking it up, particularly if you seem to want to debate their views, rather than just acting on their suggestions. Clearly, you will have to gauge for yourself which, or perhaps whose, advice to use and how to express your responses to it, but as you learn more about writing you may find that you have opened a new debate in your department.

Perhaps we can agree that academic writing is not infinitely various; there are recurring patterns and dominant norms and forms within and across disciplines. Consequently, the range of structures and styles at your disposal is not infinite. Your writing choices are limited by the conventions currently operating in your target journal. Each journal has its own genre, certain types of arguments that are privileged over others. There are those who have made a study of genres:

Gould's synoptic history of evolution **unfolds as a kind of narrative**. **Life begins** (prokaryotic cells), **develops** (eukaryotic cells), **diversifies** (Ediacara and Tommotian creatures), **explodes** into the modern fauna of the Burgess Shale and **then subsequently subsides** through large-scale attrition **until we arrive at** the ever diminishing number of extant species co-habiting the planet **today**. To make his point Gould rewrites Darwin's

model of evolution as a puzzling story, whose climax (the Burgess Shale) is clear, but whose interpretation is a matter of considerable debate.

(Halliday and Martin 1993: 36)

Narrative is a genre linked by time words, with implied or stated continuity between stages, which themselves may be open to question – does everyone agree that these are the key stages? – and perhaps avoids the more complicated cause-and-effect mode. Simply saying that one thing followed another is still open to question, but it may require a different type of evidence than causal analysis. Some might question the link made by the words ‘we arrive at’, since it implies a connection that either has already been well argued or is about to be.

The point is to identify the genres that are used not just in your discipline, but in your target journal. If not narrative, then what?

### ***Joining the conversation***

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This does not mean that your writing should be ‘conversational’; although there is a place for informal writing as part of your writing process, it may not appear in your paper. It depends, as always, on the journal.

Lack of rhetorical education – lack of awareness of the skills of written debate – leads some new writers to write in ways that are closer to conversation than is appropriate, but, again, it depends on your field and your aims as a writer. New writers’ personal engagement with their topics and their concern about finding their own voices can lead them to make their writing too personal.

What you are doing, in writing an article for a journal, is joining an on-going conversation. It may have been going on for many years. You can analyse this conversation:

- Who is already participating in this scholarly conversation?
- Who decides who can join in?
- Do you know anyone who is already taking part?
- Who has been excluded?
- What are they all talking about?
- What is already being discussed?
- What have they not talked about for a while?
- What do you want to tell them?
- What do you need to do and know in order to join the group?

Your answers to these questions could, in some fields, be topics not only for exploratory freewriting but also for your academic writing.

You have to establish your place in the conversation: on what terms can you join the on-going debates in your field at this time? Even when you have thoroughly analysed the conversation, make a clear case for your contribution, as persuasion counts more than performance in this type of conversation.

You can use writing at this stage to develop your ideas. If you do no writing at this stage, as you study the writings of others, there is a chance that you could get distracted from your own ideas. In fact, writing regularly can help you to develop your ideas, perhaps exploring several potential lines of argument.

Besides, it should be clear to you now that even those whose papers you find dull or unoriginal have put a fair amount of blood, sweat and tears into getting published. They may be well aware of the flaws and deficiencies in their writings. Yet, experienced people at the journal judged them to be adequate.

To say that we can have compassion for other writers will seem, to some, to be taking it too far, but something in that direction helps you to see published papers not as part of some great game or fraud, but as the efforts of real people to make a real contribution to knowledge. Perhaps others will see your writing in the same light. Imagining readers giving your writing this more receptive response can help to maintain motivation; in which sub-group of your target audience is such a compassionate or collegial response likely to occur? Can you usefully focus on that sub-group as your audience for at least some of the time? Of course, it is also important to consider the voices of those who will be critical of what you say and write: who are they, what will they say, how will you respond?

Taking this one step further: can you see yourself as part of a community of writers, all facing the same challenges? If so, you can position yourself, as a writer, not on the outside looking in, but on the inside looking around at how other people are getting on with their writing.

### ***Cloning or creativity?***

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It is precisely because common structures of evaluation and advancement in various academic jobs require homogeneous thought and action . . . that academia is often less a site for open-minded creative study and engagement with ideas and more a space of repression that dissenting voices are so easily censored and/or silenced.

(hooks 1999: 140)

Some academics feel that targeting a journal by becoming a scholar of it is like 'cloning', losing your identity as a writer, losing your own voice. Some new writers say this feels like compromising, blending in, losing your originality.

One even put it as strongly as ‘prostituting’ the work, although he immediately withdrew the remark, stating that he had taken it too far.

Yet, it can be exactly the opposite: targeting is about working out where, within the on-going discussion in your discipline, what you want to say can be rendered relevant and, at the same time, original. This is not about losing creativity; it is about applying your creativity to finding ways to have your say.

This is not a way to lose your voice; it is a way to choose how to give voice to your message, rather than just expressing it in the way that suits you. This is a process of giving external voice to your thoughts and ideas. Finally, if you do not test your writing, by submitting it to peer review, then you will have no voice, only thoughts and ideas.

In any case, as has already been acknowledged in this chapter, you may be very far from ‘cloning’ if your paper is going to fill a gap in the journal’s publications:

Matching your subject to a company’s [or journal’s] strength may be the single best placement strategy, but matching it to a company’s [or journal’s] obvious weakness can make sense too.

(Appelbaum 1998: 81)

You can see an area in which your target journal has not published as a ‘gap’ in a different sense.

... pick a topic from within a journal’s remit on which it has published little.

(Blaxter et al. 1998a: 152)

There is pressure towards ‘homogeneous thought and action’, but this need not silence you altogether; perhaps the challenge of writing in your field is finding ways of saying things that go against the grain but still find an acceptability within your field.

The best strategy is to know what is dominant in that sub-field of your discipline represented by those who are published in your target journal, and to let that influence your writing, while, if it is feasible, still being able to move away from that when you choose, and still get published. It may be that to write with too much of an eye on the business of what ‘counts’ may change ‘the nature and spirit of the words that come together on the page’ (hooks 1999: 163). This may be inevitable, but it does not always mean that the ‘change’ will be negative and limiting. Nor is it predictable, and this is one of the things that makes writing both frustrating and exciting.

## ***Mediating***

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Rather than take yourself out of the running, there are ways in which you can build the apparent interrogation of your ideas into your writing. Anticipate the refutation of your work and build it into your paper. Show the debate in your writing. Establish a mediated position for your paper.

You can redefine some of the terms that you think might be thrown at your writing: 'practice' orientation, for example, can be defined in many different ways, not all of them pejorative. If you check the literature, you will probably find many of these definitions, allowing you to recover the term for the purposes of your argument. If you cannot find a sufficient range of definitions in your own field, of this particular term, check out other fields.

Your work could be based on a body of practice, draw on practice-based research, use research conducted at one institution to prompt research at another or establish connections between practice and research orientations, arguing that this is, in some cases, a false distinction.

Any potential tensions between what you want to write and what they want to hear can be built into your writing: you can make it the subject of part of your paper. In some fields, this might be the subject of an entire paper.

## ***Personal negotiations***

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Do I contradict myself?

Very well then. . . . I contradict myself;

I am large. . . . I contain multitudes.

Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself'

It is not certain that you will hold to the same position, in the scholarly debates you enter, for your entire writing life; you may change your mind. As your ideas develop, you may take a different slant, or you may disagree entirely with something you wrote earlier. You may have new findings that contradict the old. Or you may find that you finally do accept to modify your argument in light of recurring responses. Whatever the reason, there is nothing wrong in making this shift, as long as you signal it, define and justify it, and make it as explicit as is appropriate for your discipline.

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## ***Contacting the editor***

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This may be one of the most important steps in your paper-writing process. It can provide you with information that is not available anywhere else.

Many new writers are surprised by the suggestion that they email the editor of the target journal directly and immediately, as a first step in the process. Yet only by doing this can you genuinely check that the journal you have decided to target is interested in (a) your subject and (b) what you want to say about that subject. Because this is only an initial enquiry, you can legitimately email several editors at once, to see if one is more likely than the others to be interested in your paper.

This strategy has worked for many new authors, helping them to adjust the slant or emphasis of their papers so as to achieve a better 'fit' with the journal and thereby to increase their chances of being published. For example, I wanted to write a paper about writing development for academic staff and emailed the editor of the journal I wanted to target to that effect. He replied that his journal was a 'research' journal and thus not receptive to papers on staff development. I adjusted the pitch of my paper to focus more on the evidence of impact in my work: focus groups, questionnaires and actual published output showed that my programme worked. I could still write about the same subject but could demonstrate research outcomes: there was evidence of an effect. I emailed this back to the editor. He was much more receptive to this approach. I wrote my paper that way, and it has since been published. The point of this narrative is that I would have wasted several months of my time had I not sounded out the editor initially. The editor's one-sentence response was enough to guide me in shaping my paper to fit in with his agenda, while still – important point – writing about the subject I had chosen. This is not to say that we should all ask editors how we should write our papers, but should be sounding them out at the earliest stage to see if they are interested at all in what we are writing.

As always, there may be disciplinary differences: according to one senior scientist, emailing the editor with an initial enquiry about your paper is absolutely the wrong thing to do. What you do, this scientist stated, is write the paper and send it in; everyone knows what they have to do, he argued, and discussing it with the editor is wasting everyone's time. This point was put so strongly that either you have to believe it is true all across the board in that discipline or it is, in some ways, challenging to this senior scientist's practice. However you interpret his response, it would be worth getting a response from more than one published author in your field, particularly if you are new to the game, but it might also be fruitful if you are not new to the process but trying to raise your game. It has to be said that there is no great risk in trying this strategy – if editors think it is wrong to approach them in this way, they will surely tell you so.

Besides, can all journal editors in any one discipline really be using exactly the same practice? How likely is that? And how would you know? Will there be none at all who see the benefit of initial enquiries from authors? In order to find your own position in this debate, you ought to note that some journals – including scientific journals – explicitly ask you, in their ‘instructions for authors’, to contact the editor before submitting a paper or abstract. Some want to see a summary first. Some make no such request, but this may not mean that they are not amenable to the practice.

First check whether your target journal explicitly invites or forbids such early dialogue. If it is not explicitly discouraged, and if you make it clear in your email, if you feel the need, that you are trying to save the editor time, rather than wasting it or, worse, looking for writing tips, then it is no more or less than good professional practice.

A further reason for and benefit of this practice is that it can produce a confidence boost when the editor responds to say that he or she is interested in your topic. Such a positive response, from such a senior figure in the field, is the first many new authors have had. Even new authors understand that this brings no guarantees of publication; but they appreciate being given the ‘green light’ to write the paper. There is, at last, a real audience for the paper-in-progress.

A further argument for such early discussion with editors is that it saves you and them time: you do not waste time writing a paper on a subject that you know they are interested in, but that they would prefer to be treated in a different way, and they do not waste time wondering whether or not to bother reading and reviewing your paper.

We all know that in some disciplines what is and is not required for a paper is very prescribed in some journals and much less so in others. Presumably the senior colleague who objected to this strategy was used to the former. He certainly stated his case so strongly that there was no debate on the matter. New writers might find such definitive advice quite refreshing; yet, again, unless the journal explicitly forbids early contact, we have to bear in mind those advantages.

Send an email with the subject ‘Initial enquiry’ to the editor. Say three things:

### **Emailing the editor**

- 1 State the subject of your paper.
- 2 Say what you are saying about that subject.
- 3 Say why you think this paper would be of interest to readers of the journal at this time – unless it is obvious, make the connection explicit.

With this version you are not giving the editor any work either in trying to work out what you want to know or in making the connection between the journal and your proposed paper. Alternatively, you could end your message with a question, since this prompts a response: ‘Do you think this would be of interest to readers of the journal at this time?’.

### Example

Subject                      *Journal of X Studies: Initial enquiry*

I am writing a paper on XXX which argues that YYY. . . . This could be of interest to readers of the Journal because it contributes ZZZ . . .

It may be important not to say that your paper is already written, meaning that you can still act on the editor’s feedback. Keep your message short and you are more likely to get a quick – sometimes immediate – response. Three sentences is plenty. Keep the sentences short enough that your reader does not have to scroll down at all.

### ***Editors’ responses***

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Some respond within two minutes. Some take longer, perhaps 20 minutes. If an editor has not responded to your initial enquiry within 24 hours, email him or her to check that your message was received. If you still hear nothing back, try emailing another editor, if the journal has more than one. If you still hear nothing, you will just have to go ahead and submit your paper.

### ***Wait time***

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After you have submitted your paper put a date in your diary, six or eight weeks on, or whenever the editor has said feedback will be sent to you. When that day comes, if you have not heard from the editor, send an email to ask about the progress of your paper through the reviewing process. If you are going to be out of the office for any length of time, this is the moment – or find another excuse – to contact the editor.

***Checklist***

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- Analyse your target journal: focus on structure, style and rhetorical features.
  - Develop an idea for your paper that either fits or challenges the dominant norms and forms of your target journal.
  - Email the editor at the start of your writing process.