

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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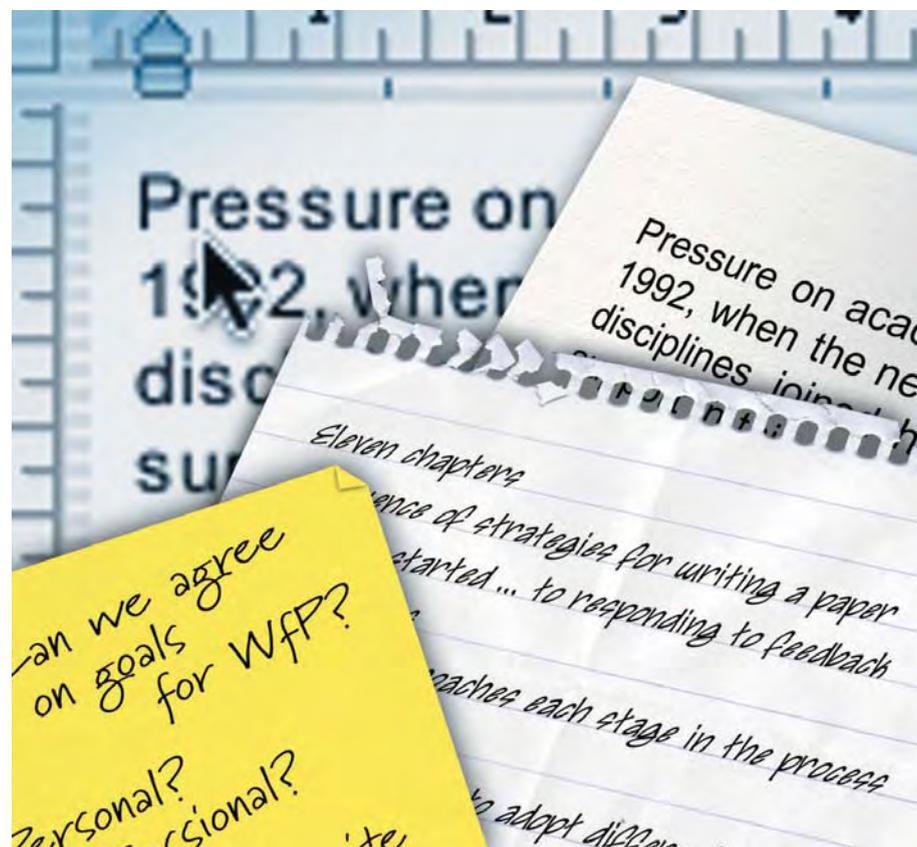
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Author of

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

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Rowena Murray

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For Phyllis

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9 Responding to reviewers' feedback

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• Destructive feedback • What to do with hostile reviews • Contradictory comments • Rejection
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• Offprints • Marketing your writing • What next?
• Recycling and 'salami-slicing' • Writing a book
• Developing a programme for writing • Checklist

It would be easier for them to reject your paper outright.

(Day 1996: 120)

Start by assuming that you're fully entitled to applause if you have: . . .

- Gotten bad reviews with good lines in them.

(Appelbaum 1998: 241)

Even famous novelists have had their share of bad reviews: '*Catch-22* has much passion, comic and fervent,' said *The New York Times*, 'but it gasps for want of

craft and sensibility' (Appelbaum 1998: 241). You should expect to get some bad reviews in your time, and there is no reason, when you think about it, that you should not learn something from some of them.

This chapter covers the critical final step in writing a paper: what to do when your paper is returned for revision. Reasons for rejection are covered first: anecdotally, we are told that the most common reason given is that the paper was sent to the wrong journal, although this may just be the editor's way of saying your paper has not met the journal's standard in some way, without taking the time to tell you why.

Insights into why papers are rejected are provided in, for example, a *British Medical Journal* publication listing methodological weaknesses that lead to rejection; and the argument is made that inadequate targeting might be a more common problem that you would think. Targeting a journal is not, it seems, simply a matter of common sense. It seems that people frequently get it wrong.

However, it may be that your paper has not been rejected, and that you have revisions to do. A process for working through your reviewers' comments is described in this chapter, along with discussion of examples of real reviewers' feedback. A strategy for focusing on what revision actions you might want to take is provided, along with hints and tips for writing an effective cover letter or email.

Above all, be content that you have received feedback, since it is much worse when a paper goes missing for months or more. Then you have to start pursuing the editor for feedback, and this can be time-consuming and frustrating. You may not always like the feedback you get, but it is better than not hearing anything.

The 'grim reader'

When you were writing your paper you naturally had to have a sense of your reader in mind. That imagined reader may be quite different from the actual readers. Reviewers do generally give papers a thorough critique. This may well be the toughest critique you will ever receive on your writing, until you submit your next paper for publication.

Sometimes reviewers appear to be unnecessarily 'grim'; they seem to take too hard a line, to miss points you felt you had made thoroughly in your paper or to want you to write a completely different paper. After all the work that you have put in to get to this point, you feel that you simply cannot be bothered to revise it again. This is a big mistake. If the editor invites you to resubmit, the best thing you can do is to get on with the revisions right away and you will have a good chance of being published if you can respond positively to the reviewers' comments. There are no guarantees even at this stage, but you will have a good chance if you can make the revisions they are looking for.

Feedback is not always fun. Sometimes it seems plain wrong. But you can always learn from it – perhaps an overstatement to say ‘always’, but when you look at the paper in its published form, you will probably, from that secure position, be more able to admit that, yes, the reviewers’ comments did improve your paper. If you never got any negative feedback, how would you learn?

It can almost be said that you should expect to have revisions to do when the reviewers’ comments come back. For whatever reason, this has become the norm. Expect there to be differences of opinion among the reviewers; this is not that unusual, across the disciplines. Expect them not to have seen what you see as the elegant symmetry of your sentences or the robustness of your conceptual framework.

Expect them even to take issue with your literature review and, particularly, with your definition of the ‘problem’ you set out to solve in your work. This is a sensitive area: you are by definition critiquing a situation, perhaps even people who have worked in that context, perhaps also people who have researched it before you, including some quite noted names. Your statement of the problematic that you set out at the start of your paper, however carefully you crafted that section, is itself open to debate and may draw fire.

Sometimes it is just one word that has pressed the reviewer’s button. You may have been just too challenging or raised a challenge that the reviewer was not comfortable with, or in terms that he or she would not use. Modulating an assertion by beginning with the words ‘It could be argued that’ may help lessen the dramatic effect that some of these statements seem to have on some reviewers. You can also align yourself with an authority in the field or, even better, quote an established figure in the field whose critique of the way things are is even more vituperative than yours. This will make yours seem quite moderate by comparison.

This is not to say that you have to comb through every single word of your paper looking for triggers that have set the reviewer off, but you do have to bear in mind that reviewers will bring not only a different perspective, but also, potentially, a different vocabulary and a different sense of what constitutes publishable work than you have, particularly if you are submitting your first paper. Their feedback will tell you a lot about where they are coming from, much of which, it has to be said, you will not be able to anticipate.

Examples of reviewers’ comments

The purpose of this section is to show how bad reviews can be. My intention is to take the shock – though perhaps not the sting – out of any negative, verging on hostile, reviews you might receive.

The following two reviews are reproduced here, word-for-word as I received them, including the italics, but with the paper’s and journal’s titles removed.

This was a co-authored paper, although only I was singled out by the reviewers by name. The paper has since been published, with revisions.

Reviewers' comments

Reviewer 1

My impression on the paper by Dr R. Murray entitled [title] is *very negative*. A short, 2-printed-pages statement would be useful as an invitation for discussion. The authors make many superficial statements, often clearly not based on any direct experience of curricular developments.

I am convinced that our Journal of [title] would not benefit from such a lengthy manuscript whose content is very limited.

Reviewer 2

Cet article aborde la question de l'interactivité dans l'enseignement. C'est un problème important et l'exposé est très intéressant.

Même si on n'y trouve pas d'éléments nouveaux ni de recette miracle, il me semble que le problème est bien posé et les considérations énumérées me semblent constituer un bon point de la situation.

Ainsi par exemple, je trouve que pour organiser un débat sur la question, la lecture préalable de ce texte constituerait un excellent point de départ et éviterait de recommencer une analyse classique des avantages, inconvénients et difficultés de l'enseignement interactif.

J'ai toutefois quelques interrogations (concernant plutôt la forme): . . .

Moyennant ces quelques remarques, je crois que, par sa bonne synthèse d'une importante problématique, cet article mériterait une publication dans l'[title of journal].

While the key message we take from reviewer 1 has to be those two words 'very negative', for reviewer 2, even if you do not speak or read French, you can probably make out such key words as 'problème **important** . . . très **intéressant** . . . **bien** posé . . . **excellent** . . . **bonne** synthèse' and, strikingly, 'mériterait une publication'. Reviewer 1 wants the paper rejected; reviewer 2 thinks it should be published.

When I show these two reviews to new writers, their first reaction is shock: 'that must have hurt'. Well, yes, it did. New writers make a number of interesting observations:

- 1 The reviews are contradictory.
- 2 They don't really say what is wrong with the paper and what you can do about it.
- 3 This is unprofessional. It's just too destructive. Unnecessarily so.

My co-author and I shared made similar observations, when these reviews

arrived, but we were greatly helped and reassured by the editor's letter, which helped us to put the reviews in perspective. Interestingly, his opening sentences confirm both the new writers' observations and our own:

Editor's letter

Two experts on the Editorial Board of [journal title] examined your paper . . . One is very opposed to the publication of your paper in its present form. Another considers your paper interesting but suggests a re-writing of the document. You will find, attached, their comments. . . . Here are the most important points to take into account:

- Introduce the problem of interactivity within the title of the paper;
- Avoid superficial statements not consolidated by results;
- Reduce the length of the paper, limiting your text to the main points;
- Avoid, in the body of the text, the use of dialogue;
- Avoid also the use of 'I' if the paper is written by more than one author.

You will understand the need of such rewriting of your paper and I am pleased to invite you to submit your new document as soon as possible.

Yet, this letter comes as a surprise to new writers: how can the editor have decided to go ahead with the paper after even one hostile review? This raises other questions: who decides on whether a paper is to be rejected or revised for resubmission? How can we find out the answers to these questions; is there any data?

In spite of everything, and for obvious reasons, the authors' reply to the editor can always begin with the words 'Thank you'. We kept the email short, in order to save the editor time and effort, and given that we were not really going to say very much at this time, apart from signalling the crucial point that we did intend to resubmit:

Authors' reply to the editor

Thank you for your feedback on our paper [title] which we found very useful. As suggested, we will change the title.

We are revising the paper now and will resubmit later this month, or, at the latest, early next month.

If there is a particular deadline you would like us to meet, can you let me know now?

Starting with 'Thank you' provides a positive start to our letter/email. What else were we saying in this reply?: we signalled that we intended to be responsive to the critique by our immediate action on one of the reviewers' suggestions, changing the title. We tell the editor our deadline, in order to motivate us to get the revisions done by then. Without a deadline, or if we were the only ones who knew when it was, revisions would fall behind a long list of other priorities. By inviting the editor to give us a deadline, we are both trying to be accommodating and prompting the editor to think about which issue of the journal we will be published in. We then got on with our revisions, resubmitted our paper and had it published in due course.

What we learned from this experience and, it must be said, from these reviewers' comments, is that we had overstated our critique of the status quo. We had not provided evidence for all of our critique. We realized that much of this problem was located in one section, so we cut it all out. This is another important lesson: you do not need to keep every word, or even every section, in for your paper to work.

There are, therefore, potential lessons for writers in reviewers' feedback. The challenge is to work your way through what can seem harsh, even overstated, critiques, from reviewers who seem to be implying – and sometimes stating – that the author does not know what he or she is writing about. Some reviewers appear to want to undermine – rather than assist – writers, while others take a more 'instructional' approach, though sometimes in a dogmatic tone:

Reviewer 1

Problem Number 8

Location – Page/Para: 21, last paragraph

The focus of the paper is on the quality assessment of research. The final paragraph makes no reference to research. It reflects an issue of the paper warranting attention: this initial focus is on quality, but as one moves through the paper the focus increasingly moves toward assessment and evaluation. They are similar; quality is achieved through assessment and evaluation. But the paper is on research quality. **Keep to that topic.**

Reviewer 2

The general case made in this paper is clearly stated and given quite good general support both from the literature cited and from arguments within the paper. However, I have several serious reservations, which can be summarised as follows:

- 1 I think that the paper reveals **a lack of comprehension** about TQM and furthermore it **merely asserts** its central influence in UK Higher Education **without citing evidence**. The result is that some of its criticisms are not necessarily aimed at the most appropriate target.

- 2 A number of assertions are made, especially in the central part of the paper, **without adequate referencing or supporting evidence.**
- 3 The recommendations in the final part of the paper are **rather sketchy** and **lacking in both detail and justification.**

The reference to 'several serious reservations' naturally rang alarm bells, but, again, as long as the paper was not actually rejected, there was still work to be done and a chance of publication.

We could critique the critiques: there are, of course, certain principles in any field that we can legitimately 'merely assert', since they are not open to question, or, you may have judged, not as open to debate as other statements in your paper. Yet, clearly, in our resubmission, we would have to distinguish more carefully and perhaps explicitly between what can and cannot be merely asserted. Comment number 2 makes this point again, locating the flaw more precisely in the paper. Comment number 3 may be making the point a third time, though it would be worth thinking about this carefully.

As for the comment about recommendations: is it not the nature of recommendations to be 'sketchy'? We obviously thought so, and judged that, whatever we thought, this was appropriate for this journal. Nevertheless, something required further development in this case. This comment is a reminder that even conclusions should be mini-arguments, with the case made for them, and the link between evidence and conclusions made quite clear: what is it that you can – and cannot – evidence?

By contrast, some reviewers can be quite positive, even encouraging:

The encouraging review

Thank you for asking me to review this paper. This a **comprehensive and well-written** paper about the use of medical humanities in occupational therapy. While I **enjoyed reading it**, I am not sure it is ready for publication as yet. Essentially it describes 3 courses in which medical humanities are used. Although the courses do have outcomes, there are assumptions made within the article that the outcomes have been met without any evidence or data to support this.

In addition, the article is unduly long at 8,000 words.

I do feel it would be very helpful to have a contribution on how medical humanities could be taught in the journal. I wonder if these authors would be prepared to redraft this as a much shorter version on how a medical humanities course could be constructed and the possible benefits.

It is difficult to predict what kind of feedback you are going to get. The point is to be prepared for the worst, to try to treat any feedback analytically – rather than emotionally – and to work out the extent to which you can deliver what they have asked for and how you are going to produce it. If there are issues raised by the reviewers with which you disagree, you can, of course, go back to the editor for further discussion.

Destructive feedback

It does sometimes seem that there are reviewers out there who like nothing better than to tear a paper – and its author – to shreds. New writers sometimes feel that they are being held back for no good reason, that the reviewers are simply protecting their power base and the narrow concerns of a small group.

Reviewers, given the chance, might reply to that accusation by asserting that they are responsible for upholding the standards of the journal specifically and the discipline generally. They might complain that this is quite an arduous job, when they are already very busy people, for which they receive no reward or recompense in cash or time. In fact, many reviewers report that they are frustrated by the falling standard of papers they receive to review and are impatient when they feel that authors have simply not done enough work, have not bothered to present their papers in the appropriate format, or are using peer review as a development process.

All of this speculation does nothing to take the sting out of destructive feedback. Nor is it entirely acceptable to be destructive when we all know they can write their comments in a different way. You have to wonder, if reviews were not anonymized, would reviewers be so destructive? Some journals distribute written guidelines for reviewers, encouraging them to provide constructive criticism, reminding them that their comments are sent to authors.

However, there is another way of reading destructive reviews: what seems 'destructive', when you first set eyes on it, may not, in fact, be as serious as you think. The comments may be very negative, yet the editor may only request 'minor revisions'. Even comments that seem to destroy your structure and style – carefully considered and targeted though they were – can still be translated into revision action points, as long as the editor has not used the word 'rejected'. The editor is not out to undermine or contradict reviewers, but they do often work at softening the blow. For example, the following reviewers' comments did not stop the editor from using the word 'positive' in his or her cover letter, inviting the authors to resubmit:

The title is a bit **weak, long-winded, and descriptive**. A more direct title is suggested.

The text uses a **plodding and subject-indeterminate passive form**, and some **awkward construction**, such as, 'The results identified . . . to be . . .'. Sentences tend to be **long and over-structured**, '. . . the epidemiology of . . . on . . . may be influenced by . . . of . . . and . . . at . . . during'.

. . . Results and Discussion: The authors proceed to analyze different factors and conclude that some are more important and others not. They proceed to discuss in great length various factors, explaining why some intuitive ones, such as water temperature, did not turn up as significant, while others did . . .

Overall, I found the paper meritorious, but **difficult to read**. The study is of practical value and consequence in the industry, and may be applicable in other organizations. I do not have specific scientific changes (the authors appear to be careful researchers), but it would help the authors' case if they **tightened up their writing style a bit**, especially in the Discussion, which is **much too long**.

What can we learn from this example of reviewers' feedback?: that reviewers have their own idiosyncratic view of what constitutes good academic writing?; that there are no general rules in writing for publication at all?; or that the authors of the paper can still improve their style and, more importantly, targeting?

- Some of the comments seem to go against good practice: for example, the reviewer is not a fan of descriptive titles, although for many of us, keeping titles descriptive is a key goal.
- The passive form seems to be so heavily endorsed in some disciplines that some writers will be surprised to see this critique of its use; but is it a problem with specifically how these authors used it, rather than with passive in general?
- Is there an implied negative in 'at great length' – and does it matter? As long as the editor has requested 'minor revisions', all the authors have to do is work out how these comments translate into revisions and, it would seem, how much to cut from the 'much too long' Discussion section.

What to do with hostile reviews

Once we lose our sense of grievance everything, including physical pain, becomes easier to bear.

(Greer 1991: 428)

Taking the subject of negative or destructive reviews one step further brings us to what seem to be openly hostile reviews. Any of the above reviews could be seen as hostile, at least in parts, by new writers. The point is that you have to learn from all the reviews, even if your paper is rejected.

Having a sense of grievance is very different from taking out a 'grievance', formalizing your complaint. A sense of personal grievance about a hostile review can inhibit revision and resubmission. Yet, if your paper has not been rejected, and if you have a good chance of getting published, why not just follow the reviewers' suggestions? Will they really change it all that much?

If your paper is rejected, you can revise it for submission to another journal. There is no point in a hostile response to a hostile review. What, after all, is your goal: to get your paper published or to improve the standard of reviewing in academic journals?

Remember the recurring weaknesses, reasons for rejection and common problems covered in this book – have you committed one or more of these errors? Even if you worked hard to avoid them, you may have made a minor slip that has irritated the reviewer. For example, remember how easy it is to overstate a critique of others' work. There may be one part of the paper that has triggered the hostility, and if you can work out which part it is, cut it. As a first step, take a good look at your contextualizing section(s), where new writers are at most risk of overstating a criticism of someone else's work, or of education in a certain field or professional practice, giving the impression that nothing is right. That may be where you have drawn fire. Sometimes all you need is a 'perhaps' or a 'potential' to modulate your argument where it is overstated. The key point is not to take it personally.

You also have to own up and admit that you can still improve your paper. Even though when you sent it in it was in a form you thought was as close to 'perfect' as you could get it, others will not see it that way. Some of this you can anticipate; some of it will take you by surprise.

Contradictory comments

It seemed that reviewers did not overtly disagree on particular points; instead, they wrote about different topics, each making points that were

appropriate and accurate. As a consequence, their recommendations about editorial decisions showed hardly any agreement.

(Fiske and Fogg 1990: 591)

It is not unusual for reviewers to disagree – not that they know this themselves – in their comments on a paper. This can be disconcerting, but, once again, if the editor has not used the word ‘rejection’, then you still have a chance to do some revisions.

There is no need, therefore, to be thrown by such disagreements. Perhaps they merely reflect on-going debates in your field. Perhaps there are shades in this debate of which you were not aware, and this is what has come out in your reviewers’ responses.

Whatever the cause – and it might be more interesting than productive to ponder this at any great length – your task is still to work out what the responses mean, not how they came to be so divergent. There may, of course, be lessons to be learned from this, but you should not be too shocked if it happens.

Rejection

... perseverance and the ability not to get downcast by rejection, which is certain and ongoing, is just part of the game – even when you’re published.

(Messud quoted in Roberts et al. 2002: 50)

You need to be able to transform rejection – and what feels like rejection, but is only a request for changes – into learning.

There is a useful and thought-provoking list of reasons why papers are rejected in Greenhalgh (2001). Some would argue that papers are rejected because the work is simply not good enough, but the number of contradictory reviews – even in scientific disciplines – suggest that it is not as simple as that.

Your paper may be rejected if there are weaknesses in your work; but there may also be weaknesses in how you have explained your work or, more importantly, in the case you have made for doing the work in the way that you did. The following adaptation of Greenhalgh is designed to show what you might be able to learn from common reasons for rejection about the skills of written argument:

Common reasons why papers are rejected for publication

(adapted from Greenhalgh 2001)

- *Your study did not examine an issue considered important by the journal's editor/reviewers.* Spell out why it might be important to the journal's readers. Make a stronger case for its importance.
- *Your study was not original,* or you did not make a strong enough case for its originality. If you cannot make the case for 'originality', try another term, one that suits your work better.
- *Your study did not test your hypothesis,* or you did not make the connection between the two sufficiently clear, strong or explicit.
- *You should have conducted your study in a different way,* or your argument for your method in the context in which you were working is weak. Were your research procedures sufficiently defined and argued for? Were you careful to make the case against logical and widely accepted alternatives that you did not use?
- *You compromised on your research design.* Can you make a stronger case for this? Even if this was the result of practical difficulties or resource deficiencies, can you still learn lessons from this? Is a smaller-scale report in order?
- *If your sample was judged too small,* should you be presenting and analysing your data in different terms: as a pilot study or a case study? Are there limited lessons you can learn? Can you make the limits to generalizability more explicit? Did you acknowledge the potential limitations of a small sample?
- *If your study is judged to be 'uncontrolled',* then perhaps you have submitted your paper to the wrong journal. Or perhaps you have to be more selective in what you are calling 'data'.
- *If your statistical analysis is found to be incorrect,* then you have some work to do before you submit your paper elsewhere, if it was found to be inappropriate here.
- *The conclusions you drew from your data were not justified.* Is this, again, a case for strengthening your argument for your conclusions, perhaps even going through them one by one?
- *The reviewers judged that you had a conflict of interest,* for example financial gain from publication. Did you make a sufficient case for your safeguards against bias?
- *If the reviewers tell you that your paper was so badly written that it was difficult or impossible to understand,* then you may have some work to do to improve your writing style – but you probably knew that anyway. Alternatively, you may be a very good writer, but might have to make more of a stylistic compromise between your preferred style of writing and the dominant style in the journal at this time.

When new writers see this list they are either incredulous that authors would submit papers with such serious weaknesses or unclear as to the relevance of these criteria: 'What does this have to do with our writing?' Presumably, the many authors who were rejected for these reasons had worked hard to avoid these weaknesses and knew full well how high reviewers' standards would be. Surely these are all common sense? Or perhaps the authors still have work to do, not necessarily on their research, but on their writing.

Of course, this list only provides insight into one set of academic disciplines – medicine and the health professions – but it also shows the range of reasons for rejection, and we should remember that this list is offered as 'common' reasons. There are other such lists and perhaps the best use of them is to consider how you can strengthen your arguments so as to avoid these weaknesses. Some writers who address common weaknesses take the more positive line of suggesting how you might avoid them:

Solutions to common problems

- 1 Following publication guidelines
- 2 Using appropriate terminology
- 3 Informing the reader of sources of information
- 4 Providing sufficient background literature
- 5 Analysing and synthesizing the literature adequately
- 6 Providing continuity of content

(Hayes 1996: 25–7)

These suggestions seem to be about solving problems in the text, rather than the methodology. Each problem may have its origins in insufficient argument for, to take point number 4, the literature that is referenced. In other words, you could argue that the literature you have referenced is sufficient, and that to reference other literature would be to lose focus on your topic and, potentially, in your argument. Yet, some reviewers do want you to acknowledge a wide range of research. Whether that is because you have left their work out of your review, or whether adding other references will genuinely strengthen your review – and thereby the impact of your argument – is for you to judge.

What revision actions could you take: could you simply add one sentence on all the other sources, or one on each, without doing too much harm to the continuity and focus of your paper? Or could you add a sentence that makes a more explicit case for the literature you have referenced as sufficient for the purpose of this paper? Or should you really have stated, explicitly, why you have not dealt with certain literature that some will think does belong in any discussion of your topic; since you have a sound reason for doing so, should

you perhaps go ahead and say what it is? You may be putting your head above the parapet unnecessarily – and for no particular benefit to your paper – since what you most want your reader to notice and think about is, surely, other aspects of your paper.

The point is you will probably have to have this mini-debate with yourself about how to respond to reviewers' comments. This debate may be easier or quicker if conducted with someone else, particularly if this is the first paper you have submitted to an academic journal.

As with the previous list, the context is the health professions, but there are points here that could be helpful to new writers in other disciplines. As with the previous list, you may think that these are pretty basic errors for authors to make. You wonder if that is because the discipline context – occupational therapy – is not as mature, in terms of published research, as, say, medicine. Yet the previous list was taken from the medical context, suggesting that such errors are not just oversights on the part of inexperienced authors, since even experienced authors have had such 'basic' feedback from time to time. Remember how 'basic' some of the reviews quoted earlier in this chapter were, commenting on the authors' writing skills, accusing them of not knowing about the subject and of not writing a paper about what they said they would. These critiques may still seem overstated, but this is the one remaining hurdle between you and publication.

At the end of the day, whatever the reason for the reviewer's comment, be it bias or genuine sense of weakness in your paper, you just have to get on with revising it, unless, of course, you feel that the comment is inappropriate or takes you beyond the scope of your paper. One thing is sure: you will learn more about your target journal from reviewers' comments on your writing.

Resubmission

If your paper has not been rejected, get on with the revisions and resubmit as quickly as you can. Acknowledge that you may have overstated a point here or lacked clarity in a point there.

For example, if a reviewer says that your critique of the literature, policy of some other dimension of context is 'well worn', you do not necessarily have to dig up the original and intervening critiques and reference them, nor do you have to invent a new type of critique, since that might not work well with the rest of your paper, nor do you have to delete it, if you think it is an important foundation for your argument. Perhaps all that you need to do is to follow the reviewer's lead by acknowledging that it is a well-worn critique, but an important one that is still current and, therefore, all the more serious for not being new and, worse, for not being 'fixed'. Your revised text might therefore read, 'Although it is now well established that there are weaknesses in the

current method of XXX, it seems that, as yet, no action had been taken to address these weaknesses', or 'The argument that XXX is a weak method of YYY has been much rehearsed/discussed in the literature; however . . .' or 'It has been argued convincingly elsewhere (references) that . . .'.

If you are accused by a reviewer of being over-critical or even 'vituperative', you could, again, acknowledge that your criticism is harsh, but well founded or strongly stated for a purpose, such as to draw attention to the seriousness of the issue or the severity of a problem that has been allowed to persist. Of course, if you are going to say that, you will have to be sure that it is both true and accurate. You can always take the moral high ground and say that you have to do this difficult harsh critique because there are those who are suffering in some way, or that research itself is weakened in some way. You can modulate such assertions, so as to avoid drawing a new form of critique from the editor when you resubmit, by adding the odd 'perhaps' and 'potentially'.

Check with someone who has been published in your target journal recently, but start thinking about changes you can make and, as you go through the reviewers' comments note the types of changes they are suggesting:

- One section seems to have drawn a lot of fire – consider cutting it.
- You do not agree with a reviewer's comment – take it up with the editor.
- A couple of comments are 'beyond the scope of this paper' – say so.
- Offer to discuss your revisions further, if you think/know this particular editor usually/ever takes time to do this.

Once you have had six or seven papers published, you will have your own list of the types of changes you have to make.

Responding to feedback from editors and reviewers

Reply immediately:

- 1 Be positive; thank the editor for the 'useful feedback'.
- 2 Say that you will revise your paper.
- 3 Ask for a deadline.
- (4 Follow the editor's interpretation of the reviewers' comments.)
- 5 'Translate' each comment into a revision action.
For example: Page 2 Cut . . .
 Page 6 Explain . . .
 Page 11 Add . . .
- 6 Discuss them with someone.
- 7 Do revisions immediately; return the revised paper as soon as you can.

When you send in the revisions:

- 1 Attach a letter/attach it to an email.
- 2 Give a point-by-point account of how you have acted on the editor's/reviewers' suggestions, using your revision action list. Keep these brief, easy to scan.

For example: Page 2 Cut . . .
 Page 6 Explained . . .
 Page 11 Added . . .

- 3 Do this in bullet points or a numbered list, or two lists, if there were two reviewers.

What now?

While as a new writer you were right to focus on getting one paper into print, in reality, and perhaps from now on, you have to have more than one piece of writing on the go at any one time. If you feel up to it, you can put in place a more complex programme of writing, particularly if your institution has set a target of two publications per year.

Nobody hates writers more than writers do. . . . Nobody loves them more, either.

(Atwood 2002: 97)

Are other people happy with your success? Does it matter? Margaret Atwood's description of the love-hate relationship between writers may apply less to you in the context of your writers' group, if you have one, but it rings true for some of the more competitive and even actively undermining reactions of some colleagues.

Do not be shocked if some colleagues ignore your success while others belittle it by, for example, remarking that the journal in which you have just been published does not have much standing. Even when you write a best-selling book, you can find some senior colleague who is keen to tell you that he or she had a book published that did not sell well because it was 'not that kind of book'. In other words, the put-downs may come thick and fast and you may find this heartily disappointing, if you were expecting collegial mutual respect, but it is not just you – it's them. Some people cannot stand others' success. They are not going to change, and they need not change your attitude to your own work. You did what you set out to do. Time to set a new writing goal and get on with that.

Focus on your writing: once you have had a paper accepted, take time to take stock. What, if anything, did you learn in the course of becoming a published writer? Did you find that there were things you still had to learn? As you look

to your next paper, can you gather some informal ‘intelligence’ about other journals from other writers? Other newly published writers may be willing to trade information with you.

Changing your first name to ‘Professor’ might open some doors, but not for long. Another option is to make some effort to join another elite conversation, perhaps by working with a Professor. The top journals represent perhaps an even more select group. There may be even more nepotism at that level, a highly contentious statement, but people do tell me that there is evidence of this. Since much of it is anecdotal, you will have to make up your own mind, perhaps not being swayed by any one person’s anecdotes. Yet it has been said to me on numerous occasions, in many institutions and in several countries, that there is discrimination on the basis of gender, race and class in all aspects of academic life, and we only have to do a quick scan of posts, publications and senior appointments to see that they are not representative of the general academic population. Nevertheless, if you are to be a publishing academic writer, you have to find a way to join the debate that they are effectively running. This is a discussion that was covered in an earlier chapter, but these issues may raise their ugly heads again as you set off on your next paper(s), particularly if you are thinking of targeting one of the ‘elite’ journals.

Acceptance

The article’s acceptance for publication is the crucial proof of its value.

(Rossen 1993: 161)

What does acceptance of your article signify to you? That you have finally reached the high standard required? That you have packaged your work in such a way that it can be easily assimilated into the academic community? Or that you have, with the help of the reviewers, learned how to make your writing persuasive to that community?

What will it signify to others? It may indeed signal to others that your work should be taken more seriously, since someone with power – the editor – has accepted it. It may be time, therefore, for you to acknowledge, if you have not already done so, that your work is important and that your writing can persuade others that it is important. This may be all the more important if, as you go on to write more and more, colleagues challenge not only your publications but also, oddly, the processes by which you produced them, as if you were practising some dark art of writing, when all you were doing was putting into practice the tried and tested methods for productive academic writing:

As long as I had only written and published one or two books no one ever inquired or commented on my writing process, on how long it took me to

complete the writing of a book. Once I began to write books regularly, sometimes publishing two at the same time, more and more comments were made to me about how much I was writing. Many of these comments conveyed the sense that I was either doing something wrong by writing so much, or at least engaged in writing acts that needed to be viewed with suspicion.

(hooks 1999: 14)

Let's assume that there will always be people who excel at 'damning with faint praise' and that publication will not give you immunity from that type of assault; in fact, it may increase it.

Do not expect that the new status accorded to your work will be 'accepted' within your department. Colleagues or heads of department may actively undermine your work, perhaps questioning the status of the journal in which you have just been published. You already know who is and is not likely to behave in this way. Welcome, therefore, those who 'damn with faint praise', since that is a relatively mild attack. Above all, do not expect them to change simply because you have. Your goal was to get published; it was not to convert your peers to congenial collegiality.

To complicate matters – and motivations – further, you may have a sense of anti-climax: it is so long since you started your paper, and you are so aware of the modesty of its contribution and are now certain that it will make no more than a gentle ripple in the sea of published work. You may find yourself agreeing with your colleagues' critiques. Remember that their criticisms are probably not based on a reading of your paper; they will criticize freely whether or not they have even read the sentence or two on your web site about this paper.

If their criticisms seem to be marginalizing you – and not just your work – remind them of the relevance and value of your work for the university and the department at opportune moments, such as appraisals, reviews and even staff meetings. Don't wait to be asked; just tell them. If this does not work, persist. Do not expect to see or hear any marked change in their attitudes. They are not going to say 'Oh, yes, I see it now – your work is indeed very important. I'm sorry I missed that before.'

If you feel you are genuinely being marginalized or even bullied, it may be time to take a different course of action, rather than trying to sort it all out yourself. You could start with an informal discussion, seeking advice from your head of department, or manager, or personnel or human resources. If need be, you have a right to take some formal action. Some people will tirelessly undermine their colleagues; be ready to look for ways to make sure that does not happen to you or to stop it if or when it does.

Once your paper has been accepted, you may feel a bit cynical – now you *know* it's all just a game, and it has to be played by their rules. You knew this would happen. You have had to compromise your work and hedge your statements so much that you feel your voice will not be heard and the value of your

work is diminished. You still feel that you should be allowed to write what you think; even if people do not want to know, they should be made to hear it.

In some ways, you may still feel exactly as you did when you started. Although you are about to be published, you may be even more convinced that academic power is wielded by a very select group, that they are not out to share their power and that you will never be able to develop the kind of authority they enjoy when they write. Your writing will always be coming from a more contested place.

In some disciplines, of course, these issues have no relevance; it is the quality of the work that matters. If your work is good enough, the argument goes, you will be published in chemistry, for example. No question. Perhaps this is truer for other disciplines than new writers realize or are prepared to admit.

Proofs

The proofs show you exactly what your paper will look like when it is printed in the journal. This is editors' and authors' last chance to make final corrections to errors. This is not the time to make final revisions. Make essential corrections only, since any changes could be costly. Editors will tell you what they want you to do and, more importantly, what they do not want you to do, so check their instructions carefully and follow them to the letter. Check every word against your original file. Check all your references. There is usually a very quick turn around at the proof stage, often as little as three days.

If you have to make a change that adds even as little as one line, try to 'catch up' by cutting a line elsewhere on the same page. There is no point in saving a line on another page, as that would require them to reset two whole pages. You should have a really good reason for doing this, probably drawn to your attention by the proof reader, such as including a reference in your list at the end of the paper that you have not actually referred to in the paper. This means that you either have to add the reference to your text, if you can find somewhere that it will fit on an existing line, or you may have to simply cut the reference. It may be a reference left over from an earlier draft that can be cut. The key motivation here is not to use this as an opportunity to 'polish' or 'perfect' your paper, but to make no changes at all, if at all possible.

Once you are at this stage, when you know that the next stage is the arrival of proofs, check with the editor about roughly when that will be. This is a courtesy that may save you all some grief later. If you are going to be off campus or out of the office for even a day or two, this will cause problems for a journal that has a three-day turn around time. Some journals allow longer for authors to check the proofs. You need to know exactly what you are dealing with. The editor may be able to tell you exactly when the proofs will be sent

out and expected back. You can then arrange for them to be sent to you – if you are away – or emailed to another address.

Offprints

Offprints are quality prints of your paper, sometimes with a paper cover, sometimes just stapled together like a high-quality photocopy on good paper. They look a lot better than photocopies. Whether or not that means that it is worth paying for extra copies is up to you. Some journals no longer provide them.

If you have some money in a special fund, or if your department has, then this might be a good use of what is bound to be a small proportion of the total fund. It is good for the department and the university, not just for you, to publicize your work by distributing offprints. If even part of the fund is designated for support of research, then you can make the case that this is one way of doing that.

Some journals offer you a set of offprints – perhaps 20 or 50 – at no charge. Others will send you a note of their rate for additional copies, sometimes charging for orders of 50 or 100. Some will give you a complete copy of the issue of the journal in which your paper appears.

The key use of offprints is to send them to people whom you know have an interest in your work, either because they have supported you or because they are working in the area themselves. Send them offprints as soon as they come in. Send them to people you want to know about your publication, even if they are not interested in your area and are unlikely to even read it. Give one to your boss. If your department has one of those glass cases for publications, get one in there now. If it does not, suggest it. At the very least, you can make your publication more visible in your department by sticking an offprint on your wall, leaving your door open, so that everyone sees it. Or you could stick it on the outside of your door, though it may 'walk'.

Take your offprints to conferences and distribute them to those interested people who come up to talk to you after your session. It may seem a bit arrogant to buy copies of your paper with the express purpose of sending them out to people whom you think will want to read them, but this is just another means of continuing the dialogue with your peers. They will probably read your abstract and then flick to your references to see if there is anything new there, anything they have missed in the literature or any new connections you make.

If you were worried about sending your paper to your peers, you may be even more reticent about sending offprints to people you do not know, but, as with any other aspect of research, you can find out who is likely to be receptive

and who is likely to be insulted, if that is what you are worried about. If you have not done so already, research the peers – those writing in your area – whom you do not know and ask around: who knows who? Finally, if there is someone with whom you would like to collaborate or write, this is a good way to introduce yourself to them.

Whatever you do with offprints, make sure that you file them in a sensible place so that you can find them if someone does ask for a copy. Start a new file, even if it only has one paper in it for the moment. Above all, do not just leave your offprints in a pile to gather dust. Put them to work.

Marketing your writing

Given that a small number of people may read your article once it is published in the journal, there is a case for marketing published articles. No one will do this for you; it's up to you. Since getting people to read, or at least know about, your writing is crucial for getting further responses and feedback, and possibly invitations to write, this is a much more important topic than new writers generally realize. Yet, with a few exceptions (Thyer 1994), this step is given surprisingly little consideration in descriptions of the process of writing for academic journals.

Some, of course, will tell you that if your work is good enough it does not need to be 'marketed'. Even when you successfully market your writing, some will come out with veiled or quite openly snide remarks such as, 'I'll say this for you, you certainly know how to *promote* your work'. Some people will make that a compliment; others will always make it sound like an insult.

You can even try to get your work featured in the newspapers or educational press. Most newspapers have an education day, often with a higher education section. If you can interest the relevant editor, providing him or her with an 'angle' on your work – make it topical, find something in your work that will be of interest to people outside your field – then you will reach a much larger audience than you did with your journal publications. Can you relate your work to recent events, trends or crises? Is there anything interestingly contentious about your work? This may be your chance to have a say about some of the issues you had to leave out of your paper.

There are also professional journals and magazines, for which you might be able to write a short piece yourself. This will not, of course, 'count' in the great scheme of things, but it will let many more people know about your publication. It may also develop your profile and network. Again, this may be your chance to bring in some of the issues, perhaps concerning practice or implementation – real-world issues – that you had to leave out of your more academic paper.

Finally, remember that you can and should still be talking about your

subject at conferences and other meetings. Just because you have published a paper does not mean that you have to move on to a completely new area; your published paper, itself possibly the development of a conference paper, can be the subject of your next presentation. If this seems like just so much recycling, think again: writing about the same subject more than once, in more than one way and for more than one outlet is the way to develop your expertise and understanding. It is not just a matter of getting the maximum number of 'hits' from your material; it is about getting the maximum amount of learning out of your publishing.

Publishers, and perhaps others, have certain likes and dislikes (Baverstock 2001: 47–8), which may be instructive to writers for academic journals:

Publishers' likes and dislikes

Dislikes	Rudeness . . . Not thanking them Failure to give information on request or help with promotion Unrealistic expectations of advertising
Likes	Focus: think about what you want to discuss before you call/email Efficiency: ask for things in plenty of time Contact: Send your contacts the occasional note of forthcoming key events and what might happen (for example, meetings at which you are speaking and at which information on your book [or paper] could be handed out) and a note of thanks if things have gone well! This is not just good nature – you will be remembered, and if any additional opportunities come up (for example, 'filler' advertisements available at last-minute prices), maybe it will be your book that gets included (p. 48).

While this may not all seem relevant to your paper, remember that some journals do feature papers in their leaflets and web sites. One paper I had featured in this way has been the one that most people have requested copies of, leading to new contacts and, more importantly, contact with people who are interested in my work.

What next?

One of the aims of this final chapter is to prompt you to think strategically, tactically and creatively about the potential subjects and stories of your papers:

- Which journals should you be writing for now or soon?
- Which ones do you think you have little or no chance of getting into?
- Why exactly is that?
- Can you convert that into a plus?
- How could your topic complement their papers?
- What would it take to make them consider your topics/ideas/work?
- Can you make explicit connections with their publication?

If you are doubtful about these suggestions, remember how doubtful you felt about your first paper – possibly at every single stage of writing – and recognize that having it accepted means that your work is worth something. Talk yourself into thinking this way – or get someone to help you to do so – about some other aspect of your work. Be creative. What would it take for one of the top journals in your field to give serious consideration to a paper from you, particularly if you have limited research data, profile or experience?

Just because you have been through the process once does not mean that you can dodge the systematic process of targeting a journal. In fact, if you are planning to target a different journal for your next publication, you should perhaps go through the same process of analysing it in some detail. This may take you less time, but it should, I would argue, be no less thorough. As before, you can learn a lot about writing from working out how published articles are put together.

Consider collaborating with colleagues or students. There may be others, in your writers' group, for example, who are keen to publish in different areas. You can also write about your teaching and supervision roles. Other aspects of academic practice are open to debate. You may want to join current debates on such matters as research training. In some systems these types of publication will not count in the scoring system, but they can demonstrate your willingness to develop in these roles and you might also learn something about academic writing.

In some disciplines this will seem nonsensical: surely you can only learn about writing for your journals by writing for your journals? Surely those who have research to write about do so, and those who do not, write about their teaching and supervision instead? Again, as teacher accreditation becomes more established in higher education, it is a mistake to discount altogether the practice of learning and writing about your teaching, at the very least. That is one way of demonstrating your knowledge in this area, as in any other.

If you are thinking of writing in another area, you might want to co-author with a colleague who is already established in that area, or whose home discipline it is. They will have more background than you; you will have a new perspective to offer them. It can be an interesting combination.

Many outputs that do not 'count' can be useful stepping stones to publication and regular academic writing. They also get your name noticed in the journals: book reviews, letters about published papers or current debates.

There is no need to wait until you are asked to review a book; write to the reviews editor and offer to do so.

As before, you should start looking for your next paper in all the obvious places: your conference presentations, workshops, consultancies and briefing papers can all work as starters for further papers, for disseminating your work and 'marketing your writing' (Thyer 1994; Baverstock 2001). While in some fields, none of these would be considered as 'research', they can be the starting point for a piece of academic writing that might at some stage become a paper. As always, you have to find the right journal to publish it in.

The key step at this stage is therefore balancing three factors in your writing decision:

- Which journal do you want to target now?
- Which topic do you want to write about now?
- What work have you done that is potentially publishable?

In some fields academics know exactly where their next paper is coming from, since it follows on immediately from the one before. But in others the process is a matter of juggling answers to these three questions; it is unlikely that you will be able to answer all three questions right away and come up with an instant topic. Your answer to one question may not match the others. For example, your preferred topic may be the least likely one for your preferred journal, and you will have to decide whether or not to persevere with it.

Whatever field you are in, there are almost always things you left out of the paper you have just completed. There are things that occurred to you as you wrote. There are questions you did not answer and possibly new questions generated by your work. There were matters – worth discussing in another forum – that were beyond the scope of that paper. In your conclusion you referred to other questions that merit further study or simply consideration. These can, in some disciplines, be starting points for your next few papers, your future research or for future collaborations.

Recycling and 'salami-slicing'

A variant on duplicate publication is 'salami publishing', in which each bit of research is divided into the thinnest possible slices (sometimes referred to as 'LPUs', for 'least publishable units'), with each slice submitted as a separate article. This is marginally more ethical than duplicate submission, but it is equally wasteful.

(Luey 2002: 16)

Yet, if you are to develop a profile in a certain area, you will have to write about it several times. It is a mistake, in any case, to look around for a new

topic, once your paper has been published. Therefore the term ‘salami-slicing’ – often taken to be a cynical strategy – can be recovered to define the strategy of planning a series of papers from any piece of work or project. It is also a useful reminder to new writers not to put the whole salami into any one paper.

Similarly, ‘recycling’ can be a useful term for describing the process of covering the same ground in a series of papers, not in the sense that you are repeating yourself, but in the sense that you are taking up in a new paper where your previous paper left off. This is a prompt to go back to all that material that you cut from your first paper and kept in a separate file. Can that now be the subject of your next paper?

Writing a book

... the so-called research assessment exercise, a crazy Soviet-style set of production targets for goods that nobody wants. It coerces even those who have the decency not to want to publish much into fulfilling their production norms.

(Allison 2004: 14)

Thinking of writing a book because you want to? Or because you think it is expected of you? Or because a publisher has asked you to? Or some combination of the three? Writing a book can be one way of bringing all your papers together – in a new form – to establish a synthesis and a coherent body of work. The book form can allow you more freedom of expression than is possible in academic journals. In terms of time, it can take just as long to get a paper from inception to publication, sometimes as much as two years, as it does to write a book.

See publishers’ web sites for guidance on how to put together a proposal, but, as for academic journals, contact the appropriate editor first with an initial enquiry to see if they are interested in your topic.

Developing a programme for writing

There are several ways in which you could draw up a programme of writing for yourself for the next five years or so.

- Year 1 First paper submitted/published (plus ideas for others)
- Year 2 Draw up list of other possible papers, convert conference papers into publications, writing several papers at the same time, target new journal

- Year 3 Targeting higher level of journal
 Year 4 Writing for journals and other outlets for dissemination
 Year 5 Pulling papers together for a book (depending on academic discipline), major research proposals and collaborations

Use the 'Page 98 paper' (Murray 2002a) to develop your ideas, beyond simply being 'ideas', and to contextualize them in the literature. This is an activity that postgraduates have found useful – to the extent of referring to it as a type of paper – in helping them to map out the context and focus for their work. It might also work for sketching a paper.

What can I write about? The context/background

- My research question is . . . (50 words)
- Researchers who have looked at this subject are . . . (50 words)
- They argue that . . . (25 words)
 Smith argues that . . . (25 words)
 Brown argues that . . . (25 words)
- Debate centres on the issue of . . . (25 words)
- There is still work to be done on . . . (25 words)
- My research is closest to that of X in that . . . (50 words)
- My contribution will be . . . (50 words).

Once your paper has been accepted, you may find that you have a slightly different view of the publishing game. You may have learned a lot from the reviewers' feedback, and you may have picked up a few dos and don'ts from how they have played their role. Whatever you have got out of the experience, it is time to move on.

If you do not yet feel that you have a set of productive academic writing practices, that will not necessarily be because you are slow on the uptake; these skills take time to learn. In time, you will also develop your own strategies. In the meantime, writing to prompts, freewriting, generative writing and the outlining strategies in this book will serve as a reminder of the range of writing activities that lie behind many published papers, even if their authors would not all use these terms.

Writing for academic journals is always instructive. It makes us test our ideas and forces us to submit to others' testing. Publication can give you a qualified confidence in your writing, qualified by the knowledge that your future work and writing will have to be tested in these ways if they are genuinely to amount to anything. Ultimately, this is where the genuine rewards of academic writing lie.

Checklist

- 
- Translate reviewers' comments into revision actions.
 - Learn from their feedback.
 - Once you are published, promote your papers.