

Success in academic writing

A book review of Day, T. (2018) Success in academic writing. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

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Overview

At times, you feel like you are 'reading' an academic writing class or tutorial. Each chapter features a range of useful activities and tips, which serve to keep the reader active and break up the prose. Trevor Day brings a wealth of experience to this book from his background in many different forms of writing: from press releases and news articles to journal papers and academic articles.

The book starts with a key message that those working in student-facing, Learning Development (LD) roles will be familiar with; yes, there are discipline-specific academic writing conventions to adhere to but there are also some universal principles that can be shared and used by all disciplines and the book goes on to explore many of these. While there are lots of published books aimed at helping students with academic writing, this is a particularly good one.

Structure and content

Chapter one is the key to the book and all subsequent chapters assume you have read it. As a whistle-stop tour around the cross-disciplinary traits of academic writing, it sets these out clearly and sensitively. Chapter one introduces us to notions such as writing to your disciplinary audience and the importance of adopting a critical mindset for the whole process of planning, researching, reading, writing and editing. Day also spells out that

which is often obvious to LD practitioners, writing is so much more than getting assignments done. It is a cognitive, iterative and developmental process, which helps you to learn and understand within your discipline.

The second chapter introduces the IPACE (identity, purpose, audience, code and experience) model, adapted from Hickman and Jacobson's (1997) SPACE model. The chapter uses IPACE as a method to work through the initial stages of understanding an assessment. Here, discussions around construction of identity and persona in assessment writing are particularly useful. We are encouraged to question what identity the assessment brief suggests the writer may need and what words and tone this identity may use. This chapter provides an overview of the IPACE model and a flowchart of questions that would be useful to LD practitioners working in student-facing roles who deliver academic writing development provision.

Chapter three explores essays and practical reports. The advice is sound and certainly resonates with the sort of questions students ask. While the section specifically about essays is a little repetitive, the section concerning lab reports is thorough and incredibly useful for students and LD practitioners alike. Day offers advice on the grey areas of tenses, structure and passive/active voice. The chapter is very sensitively handled, reiterating the ethos that any guidance provided is 'a stimulus, not a straightjacket' (p.42).

The next chapter covers much of what LDs frequently advise students regarding research, i.e. start from a general perspective and make your evidence more specific from there, appreciate and appraise a range of literature as it is the substance behind your assertions. Day delivers a number of activities that could easily be turned into a session about researching for the purposes of assignments, essentially offering a ready-made pack for teaching. Pleasingly, Day highlights the integral role that library services often play. It is also refreshing to see a published author say that, while Wikipedia should not be cited as 'evidence', it can offer a good starting point on topics you have little understanding of and can lead to further inquiry. Finally, the author introduces the RABT system (relevance, authority, bias/balance, timeliness) as a means of quickly appraising evidence. There are so many good ideas in this chapter, that summarising them all would be difficult, but this stands as a particularly enjoyable and useful section of the book both for students seeking advice and for LD practitioners perhaps looking for inspiration.

The next chapter is largely focused around reading techniques. A short section at the end of the chapter offers an overview of a small selection of note-taking techniques with some useful links to excellent resources offered by the Open University. Focusing on purposeful reading, however, is a good choice, as Day handles this very well. The author is bold in stating on numerous occasions that students do not always need to read every source from cover-to-cover, by highlighting the strategic worth of skimming and scanning work. Stating that he does not always read every source in its entirety and 'I know that most of my colleagues do this too' should offer much-needed comfort to students. The concept of purposeful reading is thought-provoking. Explicitly writing down what the purpose of a particular reading is, and what you may be able to do differently after said reading, is a very powerful technique that is certainly worth sharing with students. Finally, this chapter sparked some thoughts around how we may take the sheer mechanics of reading for granted, particularly when advising or teaching groups of international students. Day explores Buzan's (2010) seven-step model for reading in some detail. It is worth considering how much longer it may take some international students to complete these processes when translating between languages.

Day next negotiates how to plan business and analytical reports, presentations, posters and critical reflective accounts. Throughout the chapter, there are a number of excellent activities that could be used in-class and frequent examples of how to enact the passive voice, where it is required, in each of these forms of assessment. The chapter also includes a number of sections detailing the kind of 'nuts and bolts' advice regarding font size, words per slide, words per poster presentation, etc. This is the kind of minutiae that students often want to know and often ask student-facing LDs. There are two particularly useful tables (p.111-112) that allow students to conceptualise how they might apply a six-step dissertation plan and evolve this into more detailed chapter plans.

Simply getting some words down on a page is often the hardest part of the academic writing process for students. The next chapter looks at the art of moving away from planning, research and notes, to writing free-flowing prose. Day recommends a range of approaches including: writing to prompts, the importance of knowing what your setting preferences are (place, time of day, etc.) and breaking writing into small bursts of time *à la* the writing retreat model that is often cited to have such benefits (Murray and Newton,

2009; Papen and Theriault, 2018). At times, the language of this chapter may be considered a little too dense for some anxious students or those completely new to writing in this manner. The chapter features just one activity; it may have benefited from more or from this activity being broken down. Nevertheless, excellent sections on the value of freewriting, punctuated with examples of his own drafts of this book, make this a worthwhile chapter.

The following, albeit brief, chapter offers tips on how to maximise the impact and readability of your graphs, charts and images. The message of this chapter is that images, figures and tables should complement your work and be presented with clarity, consistency and care, and that by doing so they will become impactful parts of your work. The activities in this chapter are, again, excellent; however, it would have been great to see a few more.

Day then tackles perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of teaching or advising around academic writing: referencing, citation and avoiding plagiarism. This chapter admirably adopts the stance throughout that 'you are a member of an academic community' (p.145) and that to plagiarise is 'academic theft' (p.158). The second position here may chime with the regulations employed by universities around academic misconduct and, rightly so, that to plagiarise *is* to steal, whether it was intentional or not. However, one wonders how many times students might be told, or feel, that they are part of an 'academic community'. Day reiterates that sound academic conduct involves the continued development of academic practices that many students have never needed to develop previously and that we should not expect them to do this overnight. It is not uncommon to find that teaching about academic conduct is delivered via a 'talk' during induction and then only followed up after someone puts a foot wrong in an assessment; Day suggest that a longer-term and more embedded approach is needed. A few more activities to apply what is discussed here would be great but the chapter is extremely respectful towards the journey most students go on with respect to academic conduct.

Chapter ten builds on much of what has come before and focuses upon reviewing and editing writing. There are some particularly excellent tables and charts explaining the stages of editing and reviewing (p.166) and the different uses for a range of punctuation marks (p.181); these are yet more excellent resources that could be signposted to. There

are also similarly useful activities in this chapter around the shortening of sentences (p.175) and using punctuation effectively (p.182). Finally, there is an important message towards the end of the chapter surrounding the presentation of written work and the impact it can have on preconceptions of the final piece. Fine-detail proofreading is something easily addressed but all too often missed by many students and it is reassuring to see this chapter address this.

Any LD who delivers student tutorials around academic writing will be familiar with students lamenting 'but I did use Word's spellchecker and there's still loads of errors'. LD practitioners know that any technology must be used critically, to avoid allowing a negation of responsibility on the part of the user. This chapter details a number of core functions of word processing and image processing software that students may wish to make use of. It does, however, keep the caveat of needing a critical use ever present throughout the chapter and rightly so. Software such as this 'should be used as a guide, which you may choose to override' (p.190). Pleasingly, Day also highlights that a single journal article can be the 'jackpot' when researching an essay, as it can contain much of the relevant literature pertinent to that area and, through 'cited by' options, it can often be a gateway to the research that followed it.

The book concludes with a small chapter that promotes adopting a reflective approach as an integrated part of the assessment creation and submission processes. Mapped to Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, Day encourages students to treat post-submission and post-feedback reflection as a part of the assessment cycle itself. This chapter also encourages students to be more directive and demanding when asking for feedback from peers and staff members. It even offers a wonderful table with six levels of analysis, complete with exemplar questions that students could use to self-assess their work or, equally, to ask questions of people offering feedback. The book signs off with a reiteration of the powerful role that academic writing has in developing critical mindsets and disciplinary knowledge with the sentiment of 'be prepared to be inspired' (p.212).

Summary

This book adopts a commendable and respectful approach regarding the ways in which students learn. It is packed full of easily reusable (with permission of course) activities and

resources that could, quite easily, form their own writing course or complement existing provision.

While the text is aimed at university students, it really is a fantastic resource for those of us who work in student-facing roles or indeed anybody interested in writing. There are, necessarily given the subject matter under discussion, some quite dense chapters but Day's method of breaking up text with frequent, easily-digested activities is a helpful approach. In the main, the text is relatively easy to read and often quite enjoyable. The book is a good contribution towards demystifying the key mechanisms of academic writing at university and will therefore be a very useful text for students and LD practitioners alike.

Author details

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