



Inspirational Writing for Academic Publication

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Gillie Bolton with Stephen Rowland



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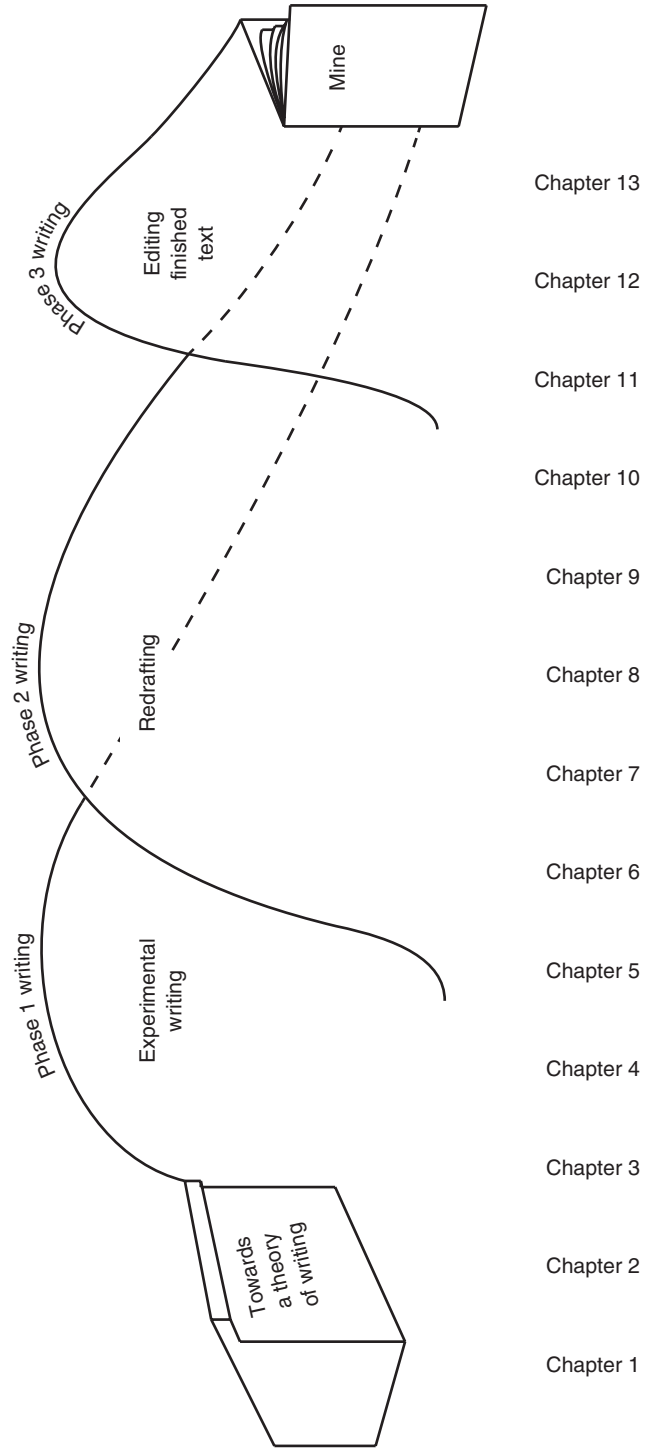
About the Authors

Dr Gillie Bolton is an international authority on writing and author of a long publication list including nine books (one in 4th edition), academic papers (many in top-ranking journals), as well as professional articles, poetry, and for a lay readership. She has peer-reviewed for many journals and has been a long-serving editor of an academic and two professional journals.

Stephen Rowland, Emeritus Professor of University College London, is author of four books on the nature of research and learning in a range of contexts, and has particularly enjoyed supervising and examining doctoral students. He has been a founding and long-term editor of a leading international journal and has a wide experience of research across disciplinary boundaries.



The journey from research to publication



Starting Out



1

How to Read this Book

Inspirational Writing shows how writing research publications can, at its best, be itself a critical process of reflection and re-evaluation. Writing can enable us to enquire into research processes, and clearly articulate arguments and theories. Through writing we form our scholarly identity and intellectual selves, developing what we know, understand, think and feel. *Inspirational Writing* gives a lucid route through the processes of writing for academic publication.

Writing can become exhilarating as we find eloquent expression for what we want and need to say concisely and with precision. And then we can communicate it confidently to those who will understand and appreciate it. If it's inspirational to write, it will be inspirational to read; if a boring slog to write, it will be a boring slog to read. If musicians play, why can't we writers?

All the information and advice in *Inspirational Writing* is from the experience of Gillie and Stephen's long careers of academic writing, editing, reviewing, PhD supervision and examining, and latterly, teaching 'academic writing for publication' courses/retreats. Here are some responses from participants on those courses:

My preconceptions were really challenged.

It was an introduction to a completely different approach to writing which solved my main writing difficulties.

I gave myself affirmation that I can find a style of my own and that is a key to being a good writer.

I have been given lots of mechanisms to loosen up my approach, and LOTS of tips about making the process more manageable.

(Academic writing course members)



Stephen

As a journal editor I have often wished for a book to inspire academics to become writers who take pleasure in the creation of the stories of their research. Written with such experienced and new academics in mind – as well as PhD students whom we see as a budding academics – *Inspirational Writing* aims to meet that need.

We have not attempted to meet the needs of PhD students for help specifically related to thesis writing: that is readily available from libraries, the internet and many books covering such issues as plagiarism, referencing methods, basic grammar or the simple questions of structure that relate to essay writing or other tasks set by tutors.

We assume that the reader of this book is already a competent researcher. Writing is itself a process of discovery and so cannot be completely divorced from issues of research methodology. We have tried, however, to take a wide approach and not to tread upon the toes of those in the disciplines caught up in important methodological debate. The book ‘wears its theory lightly’ as one helpful reviewer put it.

We wished to give our attention to academic writing because we realised so much bad writing is caused by fear and lack of understanding of its processes, a finding echoed by Stephen King about fiction (2000: 127). This fear leads some academics to write with a conspicuous lack of authority, and as a consequence their texts tend to appear pompous and inscrutable.

All hide behind the idea that unintelligible prose indicates a sophisticated mind ... [Yet] awful indecipherable [academic] prose is its own form of armour, protecting the fragile, sensitive thoughts of timid souls. (Limerick, 1993: 24)

A useful approach to this problem is to reflect:

Who is in charge? Am I in charge of my own writing? Or is my writing in charge of me, or perhaps some imaginary judge from my past is in control, and I am merely a passenger? If I am not in the driving seat, why aren't I?

My study of good and bad writing started with George Orwell's *Why I Write* ([1946] 1984), which he managed to make engaging, funny and eminently readable.

Authors and readers have begun publicly to vent frustration that critical writing uses unreadable, ‘strangled and pretentious’ language (Grey and Sinclair, 2006: 445), severely restricting readership to an exclusive few. And there is a wider public concern that academics should communicate their research more effectively across disciplinary and social boundaries (Rowland, 2006). Organisations such as the international Wellcome Trust promotes health research and public engagement with that research. We even have a

rising class of ‘celebrity academics’ who regularly appear on television and other public media in an attempt to address this need. While we do not expect our readers to aspire to celebrity status, and there is much that is problematic about such a notion, we do agree that academic writing should develop ways of more widely communicating its research.

There are approaches to writing that can achieve this:

The writing we like doesn’t just tell people things in a didactic way, it opens a door for an experience to be had by the reader. Good writing is suggestive and pungent, it evokes feelings – relief, recognition, drama, disdain, horror – and bodily responses – the flush of recognition and the sharp intake of breath, the tingle as we feel that this might be showing us something we hadn’t thought or experienced before. Good writing is often unpredictable – shocking in its terseness or economy, audacious in its sudden sweep or the intimacy of a confidence. Our concern is that very little writing in our field has these qualities. ... We want writing to be taken seriously, as powerful and evocative performance, able to change peoples’ experiences of the world, rather than as a shriven, cowed and cowering path towards routinised, professionalised ‘publication’. We wonder if it is possible to write differently. (Grey and Sinclair, 2006: 452)

It is not only possible, but imperative to write differently. It is exhilarating when we’ve managed to say what we mean, and mean what we say: clearly, succinctly and inspirationally. At other times it’s tougher, but then intellectual endeavour and enquiry is hard work. Hopefully, having worked through this, no writer will feel that ‘Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness’ (Orwell, 1984: 10).

Inspirational Writing gives clear developmental phases which can be followed in order, or used in ways appropriate to each writer. The chapters are set out according to these three phases; they make perfect sense read in any order, however, according to the preference of individual readers. Reading the first three chapters first would however be most supportive.

We only learn how to write by writing. Stephen and I recommend doing the exercises included both within the text, and at chapter ends. If you only have time for a few, please try the ones all our academic writing course members found most powerful:

- Expressing the essence of the work in one sentence (p110–111, 113)
- Writing letters to and from
 - readers (p61–2)
 - internal mentor (p50, 58, 82–3,91)
 - internal terrorist (p83, 91)
- Reordering sentences and paragraphs and sections (particularly paragraphs) (Chapter 11)

The further readings at the end of each chapter include some texts giving straightforward practical advice, and some exploring much more theoretical aspects: all drawn from a wide range of disciplines. We suggest reading whatever seems interesting and useful: this book does not assume readers read the lot.

When we come across academic writing in the future (we're both retired), we hope to hear how writers really enjoy the processes of writing and perceive the actual writing as research in itself. There will be no further need for such as the *Journal of Philosophy and Literature's* Bad Writing contest: nominations for the competition were solicited on the internet, and the final tally broadcast. The public caught the joke about academic writing being helpfully exposed. The fourth annual winning sentence was:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

(Judith Butler, quoted Bauerlein, 2004: 191)

Eubanks and Schaeffer (2008) on the other hand make something of a defence of academic writing, based on the writing of the American philosopher Harry Frankfurt.

Inspirational Writing is written as a dialogue with different voices offering a range of perspectives and strategies. I, Gillie Bolton, take you my reader, through all the stages and phases, giving explanations, examples and exercises. Stephen Rowland consistently chips in with advice from his own wide and lengthy experience as author of several books and many papers, journal editor, PhD supervisor and examiner. The voices of other authorities in the field and our own academic writing course members, add richness where appropriate.

There are also four fictional academics, whom we created to contribute sections of their reflective research journals. They tussle with the writing problems presented in each chapter. These two women and two men, at different stages in their careers, are based on the many academic colleagues and students we have worked with over our long careers. We imagined them reading the draft of *Inspirational Writing*, undertaking the writing exercises, and

reflecting on their ongoing problems in their research journals. Their journal extracts raise issues and problems at the start of each chapter, and are responded to and dealt with practically and critically in that chapter. So these monologues reliably inform you, our readers, what is in each chapter in a fuller way than any bullet list could. They also reinforce the learning from previous chapters.

We found Seamus, Helena, Lee, and Joseph's responses to our text really dynamic. It often felt as if they were nudging us to include significant elements which we'd missed. Or that their very human dilemmas and problems helped keep us on track. In an interesting way, they helped us do what we are recommending to you, our readers, as we went along. Here the characters introduce themselves with part of their responses to my first exercise, which follows their short pieces.

Seamus:



Well that's it! I've just got to get my ideas together if ever I'm to make a mark in the kind of journal that will lead to my getting a chair before I'm 60. Pity I can't just do it by teaching, I so love talking to my third years and post grads about my thoughts on number theory. Why does research always have to be more important than teaching? Socrates didn't write! I think there's a lot of intellectual snobbery about research publications. I want to publish, but am not prepared to lose my values as a teacher.

Helena:



Who am I, and where and how and why am I just now? Well I think I'm probably having a mid-life crisis (I'm 42). Am I right to want to change things now? I could stay in my job at the college, which is a good one, or I could really put my heart and soul into all the ideas which are winging around in my mind for this PhD about the role of humour in teaching painting, and then – dare I hope – become a lecturer at a really progressive thinking university, with a publication list. But as a painter, I'm a real beginner in writing, especially the academic sort, and need a lot of help.

Lee:



OK. Me? I am here in Cambridge, actually a lecturer, but not with tenure. I want to make the best of the opportunity. Everything is so different from home here. My research? Genetics. It's all clear to me, but they say my written English is not always clear. Because I need to write up my research, that is what I need to work on. I've been invited to submit a paper. It is to a prestigious journal special issue. This is exciting, but I know I'm not ready.

Joseph:



I'm very excited about my new postgrad contract. It really gives me the chance to extend the debates on 'after postmodernism' in the social sciences and make my mark. Not sure how this book will help, but it can't do any harm even if it is for people who lack my confidence in written argument and theory. I've not had much luck in publishing since my PhD, but I guess it's just a matter of time. I think my grasp of written English is pretty good even if it isn't my first language, but there does seem to be something rather stuffy about the way English academics write, which gets in the way of my flow of ideas, particularly when we're dealing with complex sociological conceptualizations, which can't just be summed up in short sentences and everyday words. Perhaps this book will help me solve this paradox.



Don't just read, WRITE!

Give yourself about ten minutes to write, set an alarm if that would help you to start straight away.

Answer these questions, quickly because you have little time:

- Who am I?
- What am I?
- How is my research and writing developing?
- Where am I working and writing?
- Why is my research important to me?
- When can I write, and when do I need to publish?

Reread it; note if there:

- is anything surprising in your responses;
- are any questions, if so answer them;
- is anything you are dissatisfied about; if so, write some more to develop your thinking;
- is anything practical your responses suggest you should do; if so do it.

And READ some more:

Eubanks, P. and Schaeffer, J.D. (2008) 'A kind word for bullshit: The problem of academic writing', *College Composition and Communication*, 59 (3): 372–88.

The language of academic publications has often been chided for being a kind of 'bullshit'. Here is a provocative discussion of the significance of 'bullshit' in academic writing, drawing upon the work of the American philosopher Harry Frankfurt. Eubank and Schaeffer make something of a defence of academic language.

King, S. (2000) *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
Stephen King writes engagingly, reflectively and valuably about the craft of writing: this is a book for all writers, not just fiction writers. And you do not have to be an admirer or even a reader of his fiction to gain much benefit from what King has to say.

Porter, S. (2010) *Inking the Deal: A Guide for Successful Academic Publication*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.
Porter presents insights and practical suggestions for both seasoned scholars and newly minted PhDs who have yet to develop an academic publishing profile. Written primarily for scholars in the arts and humanities, Porter's advice will help readers gain a valuable understanding of the publishing process and a new confidence with which to pursue academic success.