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Review of Three Publications on Academic Essay Writing

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Book Review

Review of Publications on Academic Essay Writing

Writing a competent 'academic' essay is arguably *the* major task of the university student. In the case of the mature student, difficulties in succeeding in that task can be the catalyst for leaving the course/university. Therefore, publications which attempt to facilitate the acquisition of the skill of university essay writing are generally to be welcomed. Three such publications are

Rose, J. (2001) *The Mature Student's Guide to Writing*, Houndmills: Palgrave.
 Greetham, B. (2001) *How to Write Better Essays*, Houndmills: Palgrave.
 Crème, P. and Lea, M.R. (1997) *Writing at University*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Each of the three publications attempts to be student friendly by varying usage of clear chapter headings, chapter summaries, in-chapter tasks, glossary of academic terms, practical exercises, lists of questions/techniques, assignment examples, tutor comments, general and specific advice. However, each of them has quite a different emphasis (purpose) and therefore, perhaps, demands a different audience.

The Palgrave publication (2001) *The Mature Students's Guide to Writing*, deals largely with quite fundamental writing skills. This is justified by the assertion at the beginning section, that the reader is likely to be a mature student having difficulties with written English, who may have started an Access to Higher Education course. Therefore a third of the book deals with actual punctuation and grammatical issues as a way of clearing the ground for the task of essay writing. While this section is no doubt worthy and possibly helpful, it is written in the style of a school textbook, which might demotivate an adult reader. Even the second section continues in the same vein while attempting to move towards 'putting an essay together'. In a section headlined as 'writing impersonally' students are advised that 'Nowadays, some tutors are happy to accept essays containing the word *I*, but your work will be more sophisticated if you learn to write impersonally' (Rose 2001: 111).

In an effort to address this contested and interesting issue in a simple fashion, the author manages to be both simplistic and patronizing, without ultimately addressing the issue at all. As the move from the 'personal' to the 'academic' is an issue which concerns many mature students, it might rightly be regarded by them as a cynical exercise if 'impersonal' writing is merely to be seen as 'sophisticated' writing.

The final section of the book addresses different forms of writing – as in creative writing, poetry and short story writing, as well as letters, articles and reports. In all cases the style continues to be helpful and probably worthy. However, in both style and tone, the author assumes the reader to be essentially driven by a desire or need to complete an onerous task rather than a desire to involve her/himself in the more exciting task of constructing knowledge. It is highly doubtful whether any mature student will ever be inspired as a result of reading this book, to further explore the pleasures of academic writing!

The second publication from the Palgrave study series, *How to Write Better Essays*, (2001), is a practical focus on the mechanics and techniques of essay writing. It also deals with the ancillary issues of note-taking, time organization, studying and exam revision. The introduction states:

In this book you will learn not just the study skills, but the thinking skills too. What's more, you won't do this alone. At every step of the way a tutor will be by your side, showing you clear and simple ways of overcoming the most difficult problems.

(Greetham 2001:ii)

While this is a broad claim to make, it is one which is generally realized within the book. However, while some of the 'Learning to analyse' component is particularly helpful, where it concentrates on 'unwrapping' our preconceptions in relation to particular concepts, it

becomes unduly complicated in its use of diagrams to explain *characteristics* of these concepts. This tendency to complicate matters by using long-winded examples or giving long and unwieldy assignments or exercises, is repeated throughout this overlong book – it runs to 279 pages. Complicating issues does not automatically mean adding depth to those same issues and, moreover, runs the risk of creating frustration in the reader. Certainly there are sections in the book which are extremely useful, for example the section dealing with interpreting correctly the 'instructional' verbs in examination/assignment questions, and the section on the cognitive domains of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. But ultimately it is a book where it is often difficult to see the wood for the trees, as the author intersperses advice and lengthy exercises on such peripheral issues as memory techniques, planning timetables, and examination revision. This would seem to indicate that the reader might be well advised to simply 'dip' into the book at particular sections of relevance or interest. Unfortunately, the author argues that the book 'doesn't deal with writing skills in isolation from the thinking skills and the other study skills involved, like note-taking, reading and organisation' (Greetham 2001: iii). As this is indeed the case, it makes for a long and laborious read from which one might extract some useful insights into essay writing.

The third publication *Writing at University* (1997), Open University Press, is the shortest of the three books, at 146 pages. From the start this book is focused on its task of guiding the reader towards the goal of better essay writing at third level. However, while the style and layout is deceptively simple, accessible and coherent, it is never simplistic. The authors of this book manage to address university essay writing less as a task but rather more as an opportunity to explore and make sense of the specific issue at hand. They also, importantly, divide the essay writing into particular disciplines; explaining that the student must learn the conventions and ways of viewing and representing the world according to their particular discipline. In this way, they make it clear, that writing an essay on an issue is an integral part of the process of constructing knowledge. For example, the section on structure (Chapter 6), examines structure as of importance because 'structure constructs the relationships between different ideas' (Crème and Lea 1997: 85). This is typical of the approach in this publication, which regards each aspect of essay writing as something akin to a holistic development in the overall adventure of constructing knowledge. It guides the reader smoothly from descriptive writing to analytic writing to ways of developing an argument. In the same spirit, punctuation is addressed as an issue of *coherence* rather than one of grammar.

In a section entitled 'Can you be original in your university writing?' the authors address the complex issue of 'voice' in academic writing. They examine the use of 'I' in essay writing – not as an issue of sophistication or lack of it as in the Palgrave Guide for Mature Students, - but as a 'university I', which is not just about telling a story but is more about acting as an observer and commentator. In this way they suggest that there is more of a continuum than a complete break between personal writing and academic writing.

In keeping with the spirit of the book the authors suggest that the introduction to the essay should only be written at the end of the process. 'This will be obvious if you accept that you may not know what you think until you have written it down' (Crème and Lea 1997:115).

Not only does this publication demystify the process of academic writing, but it does so in a way which enables readers to develop their own knowledge and sense-making abilities in relation to their specific discipline area.