

Chapter 2. Academic writing challenges

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This chapter identifies the bad habits that are commonly found in academic writing. It also identifies particular challenges that researchers might face such as writing as a non-native speaker.

2.1 Bad writing habits (Tara Holland)

This work takes a brief look at the most prevalent challenges of academic journal writing in the business domain, from the perspective of the author and the reviewer. The top three bad habits of authors are explored as well as corresponding solutions.

The exponential growth of academic literature has been well documented (LaPlaca et al., 2018; Wagner & Kim, 2014). Technology has played a fundamental role with the introduction of 'open access'. 'Open access' refers to the provision of free, online, permanent and unrestricted access to research (Stacey, 2020). Furthermore, the global collaboration and communication among researchers has increased, thanks to academic social networking sites (Ovadia, 2014).

This growth presents a corresponding challenge to publication editors. As the number of manuscripts sent for publication increases, rejection rates are now running at between 80% to 95% depending on the publication (LaPlaca et al., 2018).

After a brief review of the literature, it appears that there are two over-arching solutions to the challenges of writing in academic journals. The first solution addresses the art of writing itself. It is often cited in the literature that doctoral programmes spend a lot of time and effort in teaching future scholars how to master the art of researching, but little or no time is spent on ensuring that these scholars are equipped to be good peer reviewers (Hall et al., 2019; LaPlaca et al., 2018). Fulmer (2012) points out that writing is not just a support activity, it is the primary way in which researchers develop and disseminate knowledge. Furthermore, the process of clear writing helps authors sharpen their ideas. It can also illuminate flaws in their logic or approach. In her article, Ragins (2012), the associate editor of the *Academy of Management Review*, conducted a poll of reviewers for the journal, and summarised the top three 'bad habits' of authors, as well as solutions for overcoming these bad habits (Ragins, 2012). See Table 1 below.

Table 1: Top Three Bad Habits from AMR Reviewers Poll

Habit	Bad Habit Description	Reviewers Suggested Solution to Bad Habit
1	Vague Writing – use of needlessly complex language that obscures meaning	Get to the core quickly – justify the need for every paragraph
2	Undefined concepts and terminology – the reader is presented with concepts and jargon that are not explained	Authors needs to put themselves in the shoes of the reader. Authors should also keep the attention of the reader by summarising the knowledge contribution upfront. The first five paragraphs (FFP) should explain the problem being solved, how the solution was reached and how the solution differs from other approaches
3	Lack of cohesive story – manuscripts often lack a clear direct and compelling story	Create coherence and cohesion – each paragraph should be driving the reader towards an unavoidable conclusion

Source: Derived from Ragins (2012) *Reflections on the Craft of Clear Writing*, *Academy of Management Review*, 37(4), 493-501.

The second solution addresses the peer review process itself, and the education of both authors and reviewers.

The concept of developmental peer review is a relatively new topic in the literature (Hall et al., 2019; Ragins, 2018; Ragins, 2015). It involves developing the author to ensure they are able to move not just their paper forward, but ultimately their field. The reviewer moves from ‘pointing out all the flaws in the manuscript’, to ‘helping authors address the flaws and uncover the gems in their work’ (Ragins, 2015, p.4). Table 2 offers a summary of what developmental review is and what it is not.

Table 2: What Developmental Review Is and Is Not

What Developmental Review Is	What Developmental Review Is Not
Developmental reviewers take a more collegial role and help authors develop their work	Not a list of positives with a long list of criticisms and limitations sandwiched in between
Instead of focusing on what is wrong with the paper, the focus shifts to what can be done to make the paper publishable	Not ghost writing – where the reviewer tells the author what to write
Developmental reviews focus on the author – what do they need? What information are they missing?	Not a hierarchical apprenticeship – where the author is treated as a junior apprentice to the reviewer
Developmental reviews create knowledge and support inclusion and diverse voices	Not lowering standards

Source: Derived from Ragins (2015) *Developing Our Authors*, *Academy of Management Review*, 40(1), 1-8.

The process that academic authors follow to get an article published is arduous and has inherent flaws (Barroga, 2020; Ragins, 2015). However, there is hope and support in the form of writing modules and the developmental peer review process. Academic writing modules are now a common module on

offer for doctoral students, as writing is the primary way in which researchers develop and disseminate knowledge (Fulmer, 2012). Developing core competencies among reviewers, continuing to educate researchers on writing techniques, and professional engagement of the academic community, appear to be the best approaches to bridging gaps in the imperfect but necessary peer review system (Barroga, 2020).

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2.2 Academic writing for non-native English speakers (Rawayda Abdou)

Previous research suggests that mastering academic writing is a challenging task for native English academics (Ragins, 2012). But what about the challenges faced by English as a Second language (ESL) authors? Previous work shows that academic writing is particularly challenging for ESL academic writers. This problem is remarkably pronounced in the business domain, given that this domain distinct from many others academic disciplines attracts ESL students in English speaking countries internationally (Davis, 1996), and in Ireland specifically. According to the Central Statistics Office (CSO), social Sciences, business and law are the main fields of study for 29.2% of non-Irish nationals with notable participation rates from Arabic countries (Kuwait, Oman, and Saudi Arabia) (the Central Statistics Office, 2016). This provides a rationale for the present assignment to focus on the academic writing problems facing ESL students in the business domain, with a particular focus on the case of the Arab students. I will conclude by previous research suggestions on how to overcome these problems.

Non-native English Speaker (NNES) authors feel disadvantaged compared to their native English speakers (NES) counterparts. Huang (2010) shows that this feeling is to some extent inculcated by peer-reviewing feedbacks criticizing the English language of their manuscripts, to such a point that their manuscripts could be rejected due to the poor language of the manuscript. A number of studies have investigated the challenges facing Arab students in academic writing in the business domain when writing in English (Alkhasawneh, 2010; Fadda, 2012). The findings of these studies revealed that grammar, spelling, lack of vocabulary, organization of ideas, and referencing are among the main problems that encounter Arab students. Alkhasawneh (2010) emphasizes the problem of lack of vocabulary, given that it is a problem that might hinder Arab students ability to express their ideas clearly and accurately. To the extent that clear writing could stand between important ideas and publication success (Saunders, 2005), lack of vocabulary could ultimately constitute a barrier to Arabs' academic achievement and international acknowledgement. It worth noting that language professional editorial services and peer corrections by NES play significant roles in shaping ESL authors' manuscripts for publication (Li & Flowerdew, 2007)

Previous research investigating the reasons behind the problems facing Arab students chimes with studies conducted on non-Arab ESL students. Both strands of literature attributed the aforementioned problems to environmental reasons. On the one hand, culture isolation and lacking opportunities to speak English (Alkhasawneh, 2010; Huang, 2010), on the other hand, the wrong practices inherent in the educational institutions, such as the low proficiency of the English teachers themselves

(Alkhasawneh, 2010). Additionally, Fadda (2012) sheds light on substantial differences between the English and the Arabic languages themselves. While Arabic tends to use more metaphoric phrases and lengthier sentences, conciseness and eliminating wordiness are key considerations in effective academic writing in English.

With that in mind, an important question then arises: How third level institutions could contribute to developing academic writing in the business domain for ESL students? Intuitively, academic writing in the business domain could be unpacked into two folds, general English academic writing skills and skills related to academic writing in the business discipline. Zhu (2004) suggests that the basic/general academic writing skills could be effectively addressed by English language courses, while developing aspects related to writing in the business domain could be achieved by courses tailored specifically to developing academic writing in the business domain.

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