



Workshop:  
Writing for a scholarly journal  
10 June 2021

# Writing: What the research tells us

Chrissie Boughey  
Emeritus Professor  
Rhodes University



science & innovation

Department:  
Science and Innovation  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



# A lot of research on writing

- Focuses on the products of writing (i.e written texts)
- It analyses texts
- It tells us what the products should look like
- So, it gives us descriptions of what, for example, journal articles look like

# The problem is . . .

- That this kind of research doesn't tell us about *how* to produce those perfect texts
- It doesn't tell us how to address the actual writing of a text

# The other side of writing research

- Looks at writers *as they write*
- Identifies what writers *do as they are writing*

# This kind of research on writing

- Began in the 1970s
- Has increasingly become more sophisticated in the methods it uses
- Has looked at writers writing
  - all sorts of different kinds of texts (academic text, fiction, reports ...)
  - in a wide range of languages (including writers using non-alphabetic writing systems)

# Over time

- It became possible to identify what 'successful' writers did and to compare what they did with what 'unsuccessful' writers did
- This gave allowed us to identify successful writing strategies
- The strategies were then developed into an 'approach' to teaching writing

# So, what did the successful writers do?

- They wrote for themselves first to find out what they wanted to say
- They used informal writing strategies (freewriting, journaling)
- They did not worry about the formalities of writing (spelling, grammar, punctuation) at this stage
- They wrote in any language
- They used writing as *a tool for learning*

# Over time

- They moved into writing for a prospective reader (the reader of a journal, the examiner of a thesis...)
- As they wrote, they imagined the reactions of this intended reader to what they were saying ('If I say this, they'll say that, so I can't say this')
- Writing thus became a process of drafting and redrafting a text in response to this *imaginary conversation*



# If they got stuck

- They moved back into the less formal 'generative' writing they had used to find out what they wanted to say in the first place

# Even at the drafting stage

- They did not pay a great deal of attention to the form of the writing

# Finally,

- When they thought they had *satisfied* or '*silenced*' their reader they moved into editing their text
- Editing involved a process of polishing the text to ensure it was technically perfect and stylistically appropriate

# The strategies used by successful writers

- Allow us to identify three stages in a writing process

# A writing process

Generative Writing	Drafting	Editing
Focus on identifying ideas	Moves into concern for reader	Focus on form – on saying things better at a linguistic level
'Informal' writing	Imaginary conversation	
No concern for reader	Drafting and redrafting	Focus on technical aspects of writing
	Focus on making meanings stand up to critique	

# Importantly

- Movement between the three stages was not linear
- Writers began with generative writing
- Moved into drafting but
- If they got stuck went back to generative writing

# Many writers

- Ignore the generative writing (i.e. using writing as a tool to find out what they want to say)
- Move straight into writing for an audience (drafting)
- Even worse, they combine writing for an audience with editing

# Some generative writing strategies

- Freewriting
- Keeping a reading journal



# Freewriting

- Identify a question to answer ('What's the relationship of x to y?' 'What does xxx really mean?')
- Set a time limit (3,5,7 minutes)
- Write without stopping for the entire time
- Don't worry about spelling, grammar, punctuation
- Write in any language
- When the time is up, stop!
- Read what came out

# A reading journal

- Typical strategies for reading include highlighting, underlining and making notes
- These focus on identifying important points, on understanding and remembering
- Academic writing requires us to make knowledge claims (statements about what we believe are true) and to support them with evidence
- This is particularly true of the literature review section
- How does highlighting, underlining or making notes allow you to identify those knowledge claims?

# A reading journal

- Open a folder on your computer or buy a notebook
- Write a complete reference for everything you read at the top of a new file or new page
- Sit somewhere comfortable
- Read without taking notes, highlighting or underlining
- Focus on what the author is saying, what claims they are making and what the evidence is for those claims
- When you have finished reading, write an entry in your journal

# Dear Diary . . .

- How does this text agree or disagree with other texts I have read?
- How does it relate to my article/study?
- What's interesting about it?
- What do I agree with/disagree with?

# Drafting: your audience

- Other sessions in this workshop will help you to know your audience better
- Ask questions like
  - What do they know (so what don't I need to tell them)?
  - What don't they know (so what do I need to tell them)?
  - What objections can they make?
  - How does this evidence support the claim I am making?  
What's missing?
- Your aim is to 'silence' your reader

# Editing

- Sit alone in a closed room and read your text aloud to yourself
- You will often hear mistakes you can't see

# Remember

- An article is about presenting new knowledge to your audience
- What are your knowledge claims?
- How well supported are those claims with evidence?