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How to write a journal article:
Top tips for the novice writer

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Abstract: This paper aims to examine and de-mystify the process of writing a journal article. It recommends a structured, systematic approach involving four stages: thinking, planning, writing, and manuscript creation. Detailed 'how to' steps are suggested for each stage, always with an emphasis on the dynamic movement between thinking/planning and revising/developing. The process described is one where the author gradually shapes and constructs their article through its different incarnations. A key suggestion is that writers concentrate on drafting shorter, more manageable sections, rather than attempt to write an article all the way through from beginning to end. Novice writers are offered tips on how to structure articles and free up their writing process. They are also reminded to attend carefully to the requirements and house style of the journal, as well as to the needs and interests of readers. Interspersed throughout is a personal, reflexive, autobiographical account of my own process during the moment-by-moment construction and development of this article.

Keywords: academic writing; practitioner research; creative process; writer's block

Part of my work as a journal editor involves encouraging potential authors to write articles and submit them for publication. Time and again I get the same response: "I'd love to write, but I don't know how" or "I'm not academic; I can't write" or "Why would people be interested in what I have to say?" Perhaps the most common response is a nervous laugh, along with a "No way – you must be joking!" Practitioners seem to see journal and research activities as being exclusively for academics. As a result, few practitioners participate in academic writing beyond course work, and even writing course assignments can feel overwhelming for trainees (McBeath, Bager-Charleson, & Arbarbanel, 2019).

McBeath et al (2019) note that this lack of confidence on the part of many practitioners stems from an absence of training and experience in basic writing skills:

> If academic writing is to become recognised as an activity that can attract positive participation across the breadth of the psychotherapy profession and feel inclusive rather than exclusive there is a clear need for an educative process to support practitioners. This need for education and support was clearly evidenced by the 78% of survey respondents who felt that academic writing should be a core skill in psychotherapy trainings. This particular finding suggests that there is a potential for much greater participation in academic writing within the psychotherapy profession if it is effectively supported. (2019, p.112)

Reading this research gave me a nudge. Could I offer something to help practitioners with their academic writing? In that moment, my commitment to writing an article about writing a journal article was conceived. As I began to write, I fell into an interesting process: one in which I simultaneously wrote and reflected on my own writing process.

In this article, I set out some of the specific steps involved in writing a journal article. Along the way, I offer practical tips geared particularly to the novice writer. While writing journal articles can be daunting, demanding, and time-consuming (Murray, 2013), I also hope to show how creative, thought-provoking, stimulating, and satisfying it can be.

Throughout I intersperse the text with a personal reflexive account (in *italics* and purple) which seeks to explore (expose?) my own personal process while writing.

As I write this, I'm aware of both excitement and nervousness. I believe an article for psychotherapists on 'how to write journal articles' is a needed and worthy endeavour. I'm also conscious that I run the risk of creating formulaic advice when there are many ways to write. Writing is a creative labour and everyone must find their own way through it.

I feel a shift within, a sense of exposure and lingering shame. Is my experience enough? Am I up to this task? There are endless articles about how to write journal articles – do I have anything different to offer? I stop and take a breath. I recognise a possible parallel process with novice writers of feeling daunted.

I gather my internal resources and supportive people around me. I remember the response of many first-time authors after they've produced their first article. Their excitement and sense of achievement touches me. I remind myself that I want to write this, and believe I have something to say. I also remind myself how many publications I have written and how many times colleagues have affirmed that I've helped with their own writing.

I turn away from my fear about writing and try to 'think' my way out by asking "What are the phases I go through when writing?" Taking a practical applied approach helps me move on...

The process of writing an academic journal article involves four interlinked stages or tasks: thinking, planning, writing, and manuscript creation (see Figure 1).

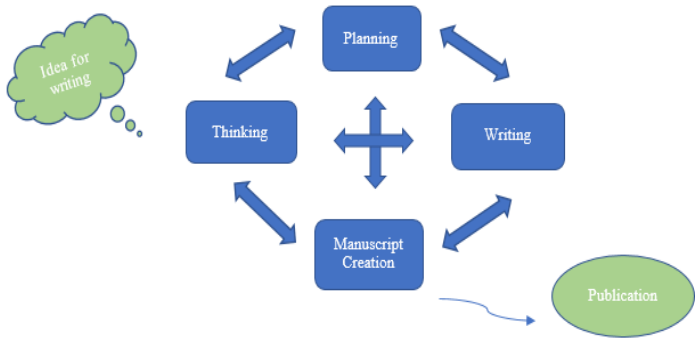

Figure 1 Iterative process of academic writing

While it's useful to think in terms of stages, writing – any kind of writing – is, above all, a dynamic process. It's not so much a linear activity as one which moves back and forth, iteratively. There is continuous movement between thinking/planning and writing and revising.

Some novice writers make the mistake of trying to write from beginning to end, starting with their introduction. In reality, a piecemeal approach in which writing proceeds in no preconceived order can be much more productive. Often, the introduction will (should?) be written last!

A further point to remember is that an article which has been provisionally accepted for publication is likely to be re-shaped after feedback from the editor and peer reviewers. From the outset, it's better to view your article as work in progress rather than something you need to offer as a 'finished', perfectly polished, product.

Thinking

Key tip:
Think before you write. Start by working out what you want to say. Do not expect to sit down in front of your computer screen, or a blank piece of paper, and just write an article!

Finding your focus

The very first moment you think about wanting, or needing, to write something you have begun a process. Then a great deal of preparation (thinking, planning, mobilising resources) will be needed before it begins to take shape.

First, **what** exactly do you want to write/say? You need to be interested in your topic and strongly motivated to share something you believe to be important or exciting. This will help sustain you through some of the more intense and inevitably tedious stages of academic writing. If you're bored with your topic before you start, you probably won't complete it. Even if you do make it to the end, you're unlikely to get beyond a mechanical, functional product. If you're bored writing it, readers probably will be too when they read it.

So, think **why** you want to write. Cooper (2019) suggests five reasons why you, as a counsellor or psychotherapist, might want to write:

i. To get into academia
ii. To improve your CV showing specialism/expertise
iii. To contribute to the field sharing research findings
iv. To take part in professional dialogue
v. As an ethical responsibility to represent your participants' voices towards improving people's lives.

When you have got your idea or topic, find a **specific focus** you can realistically cover in one article. In the case of the broad topic of 'the therapeutic relationship', for example, the focus could be 'the experience of the moment of depth connection;' or 'exploring a negative transference;' or 'understanding erotic transference;' or 'factors that create a therapeutic relationship'.

Or suppose you've just finished a Masters/doctoral thesis. It is particularly challenging to convert thousands of words of academic thesis into a 6,000-word article, so finding a focus is important. Do you want to highlight the findings of your research or does your special interest lie in the methodology you used? Don't make the mistake of trying to reproduce your thesis in summary form. Instead try to pick out something of interest from your research that you'd like to highlight.

The idea of 'salami slicing' (Cooper, 2019) is relevant where you might selectively present some findings or issues in one article and then take a different focus in another. For instance, in a mixed methods study, we might send the quantitative results to one journal and the qualitative findings to another, while your literature review could act as a third article. Care just needs to be taken, however, to ensure the research is conducted with *ethical integrity* as a whole. It's important, for instance, to cross-reference the papers. You do not want to mislead readers about your research output, making them think that separate projects have been undertaken.

The process of slicing up bits of your thesis is always going to be challenging as Cooper notes:

> Some of that hard fought, painful, agonised-over-every-word-at-four-in-the-morning will have to be the mercy of your *Delete* key. That can be one of the hardest parts of converting your thesis to a publication — it's a grieving process — but it's essential to having something in digestible form for the outside world. (Cooper, 2019)

Thinking about my current topic of writing of 'academic writing', I recognise how many different directions this article might take. The nature of academic 'shame' would be interesting, but that's a bigger research project. For now, I just want to produce something shorter and congruent with my editor role/responsibilities which offers support to a future generation of new academic writers (and readers). I want to contribute to the field to help psychotherapy practitioners write towards narrowing the practitioner-academic divide. This, therefore, needs to be a practical 'how to' piece. I need to try to keep it concrete and give examples of the 'how'.

Taking the readership into account

Once you've chosen your topic you need to think carefully about your target readers or **audience**. What might they already know about the subject? What aspects might they be especially interested in? What message or new information do you want to impart? What impact might it have?

You also need to think about the specific **journal** you're aiming for and you should do this early on. Often novice researcher-authors can fall into the trap of writing an article and then trying to find someone to publish it. Really you need to do it the other way round because journals guide you about what and how to write. It's important to attend to the journal's declared statement of its aims and scope.

When you've got a journal in your sight ask yourself: What kinds of articles do they normally publish? What topics seem to interest them? What is the style of journal: is it academic, scientific, and scholarly? Or is it less formal in tone and maybe

orientated to non-academic practitioners? The readership of the journal determines both the level and type of content wanted (Murray, 2013). It is important to read the journal's guidelines carefully. If you are unsure about what to focus on, why not email the editor of the journal you're thinking of publishing in and discuss it with them?

In the case of this *European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy*, it is interested in a practice orientation. Many of the practitioner readers do not have an academic background and English is possibly not their first language. The writing needs to be reasonably straightforward, relevant, and – ideally - interesting to practitioners.

Thinking about my process with this paper, I started with thinking about those many post-graduates who seek to convert their thesis into an article. Their process is commonly fraught and full of shame. Unless they get extra support or inspiration, often the research will languish in a bound volume and never see the light of day. How can I help inspire them to write?

I'm envisaging you, the reader, are a practitioner but a relative novice when it comes to academic writing. It's also possible that you're involved in teaching novice writers. Perhaps you are seeking tips for the article you have in mind. It follows that I need to keep my article reader-friendly: for example, by using concrete examples rather than fancy words and academic references.

It seems that I have sense of my reader, but I'm unsure of what journal to go for. I'd like to publish in the European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy (EJQRP) but I'm conflicted with the ethics of publishing in the journal I am editing. I research this dilemma online and talk to colleagues who have edited academic journals… The responses I get are quite mixed. Most of those I consult believe it's okay for an editor to publish a piece in the journal they edit providing there has been a rigorous, transparent and thorough review process (ideally a 'blind' process meaning that identifying content is blacked out/removed). The fact that my colleagues on the Editorial Board have encouraged me to write this article for EJQRP encourages me to submit there. I start to wonder how I can make this article 'blind' as my fingerprints are all over it…

For now, I set aside my dilemma. I need to write this thing before I am paralysed by my own process. I turn my head to the planning process…

Planning

Key tip:
Plan your basic structure and/or storyline first. Get a sense of where you're going, *then* pull together your resources and accumulate content.

During the planning phase, you'll need to do the following: sharpen the focus of your article; gather your resources; find a hook and a storyline; and then plan your structure and content, while considering any word count constraints.

Sharpen your focus

Once you've decided you're going to write for a specific journal, you will have a sense of the constraints you'll need to work within, including the suggested word count of your article and the type of manuscript they prefer.

This is the time to be selective about what you're trying to say. Ask yourself, "What message do I want to get across?" For example, rather than trying to write about your entire Masters/doctoral thesis, perhaps you can select one particular issue to write about and construct your article around that. Or you could expand on three key themes rather than detail all the ones in your thesis. (I'll say more about this later.) Remember: you're constructing a standalone article rather than reporting on your thesis. You can always write other articles dealing with further aspects of your research.

Your challenge is to find a topic that's not only relevant and interesting but also do-able given your time constraints, the journal's own requirements, and other practicalities. You need to temper your enthusiasm with a spot of pragmatism. Novice academic writers sometimes fall into the trap of wanting to make a significant contribution, only to find that this grandiose goal has a paralysing effect on their writing. It's usually better to think in terms of saying "a lot about a little problem" (Silverman, 1993, p.3), rather than a little about a big one.

Clearly, the choice of writing topic will be driven by personal, professional, and/or academic goals. What is driving you? Are

you required to produce something as part of an academic course? What assumptions do you have about your topic? Is there something more to be learned or explored?

As you fine-tune your focus, try to be as specific and concrete as possible – while also being open to letting your focus shift. To give an example, I once started writing an article about doing phenomenological research. By reflecting on my topic, I realised that what particularly interested me was the researcher's use of their body in the process of research. The eventual article published was more specific, entitled 'Embodying research' (Finlay, 2015).

When I sit down to write, I often begin with doing some actual Focusing (Gendlin, 1996). I tap into my body wisdom and 'feel' my topic from the inside. Sometimes, something important or interesting emerges out of those moments of embodied reflection. I might experience excitement bubbling up about a particular line of argument – excitement that tells me that 'this' is what I need to write about. I try to follow my motivations and interests. I open myself to what pressure I'm putting on myself and perhaps recognise some of the expectations from others. As I begin to see what it is that I need to do, I become aware of some of the traps ahead.

As I do some Focusing now, I become aware of the tensions triggered by my ambition to help others write. My 'scare' and uncertainty come forward. I feel both regret and frustration that I haven't quite managed to inspire others as much as I would like.

*I dig further… The message I want readers to hear is that writing is a **process** – it takes time. But I also want to show that it can be done if you take a structured approach and that it can be both challenge and pleasure.*

Gathering resources

It then helps to start to gather relevant resources to support and surround you. First, explore **existing academic writings** around your area. It's important – particularly for academic writing – to check out the wider literature to assess what is currently known about your topic. *Google Scholar* can be invaluable here. Also, check out other relevant search engines and databases, such as *PubMed*, *APA PsycInfo*, *CINAHL*, and so on. What research, if any, has been done on your topic? This orientating exercise will help you recognise how your topic is currently being framed and give you a sense of where the gaps lie. Along the way, you'll collect a few choice resources (books and articles). These will become the references you use to 'decorate' and substantiate your own academic argument.

Searching the academic literature takes time and effort and can't be rushed. But tracking down relevant research can also be exciting; there's often a snowball effect where you start with one source and then find yourself following up intriguing lines of enquiry, helped by the references the author has provided.

Most practitioners are not attached to universities which makes doing the literature review an extra challenge as you won't be able to get access to many articles. Don't let that stop you, however. You will have access to most summary abstracts and many scholars put early drafts of their articles online. You can check those out and perhaps even contact the author directly for further information.

It is like doing a literature review when engaged in research. Yes, it has its tedious side. But I like the stimulation of the new learning. I also like playing 'detective' and following up on clues and elusive references. It's satisfying to follow up on little clues like the odd reference in an article, to discover a new piece of 'evidence'.

As I reflect on this, I realise that I enjoy finding 'kindred spirits': people who have an interest in my topic. I am reminded that, for me, writing is less about ego and professional/academic status games, than about having a 'voice' and finding a community to share my ideas with. As a psychotherapist in private practice, and as an academic teaching an online course, I have less contact with colleagues than I would like. For me, writing is the way by which I can dialogue with others and grow.

In addition to following up academic sources, it helps to hear about other people's experiences. Talk with others. What interests them about the topic? What might they find useful to learn more about? They may well have some good ideas, as well as suggestions, for resources.

Through conversations with others you might be able to find a **writing buddy** (and/or a mentor). It is essential to have someone to bounce ideas off. Academic writing is meant to function as an ongoing dialogue with others, not an isolated activity in which everyone is in their own bubbles. For this reason, often authors prefer to write with co-authors/co-collaborators.

Once you start writing, it's even more important to have someone (at least one person) who will give you feedback on emerging drafts and help **edit** your work. When writing, it's all too easy to get stuck in your head or 'lose the wood for the trees'. Having a friendly supportive person around can make all the difference. I mobilise different people as writing

supports: my husband often reads my firsts draft to sharpen my language use; or I will share drafts with colleagues who act as 'critical friends' to clarify my content. Sometimes I might even employ a professional editor to transform clumsily phrased words into something that flows.

Finding a 'hook' and a 'storyline'

Part of the process of sharpening your focus is looking out for an interesting 'hook': a way to capture your readers' interest. Does your topic tap into a specific debate or ongoing controversy? If so, this could provide a starting point and rationale for your article. Hooks can also be provided by catchy titles or lively opening passages. Of course, not all articles have a hook, but most good ones do. Look for the hook in the introductory section which sets the scene and tone, and draws the reader in.

If you have just completed a thesis and are considering writing about your research, try to think of an aspect of your research that will particularly interest others. It can be rather boring to just hear the details of how they did their research and what they found. Rather than doing that, identify a point of interest: something that draws the reader's interest and makes them want to read further. The hook can be *personal* ("I've been fascinated by this topic for years and decided to do some research…"); and/or *clinical* ("research currently says x but this doesn't always apply in practice"); and/or *academic* ("There is much debate in the field" or "There is a paucity of research on x").

In my time, I have been to dozens of conferences and have sat through endless presentations of people's research. I go hoping to be inspired. Sometimes I am, but there are times when I just find the presentation boring, if I'm honest. The problem is that speakers can fall into the trap of presenting the research logically, starting with the research question and details about methodology. But then they run out of time and they are forced to rush through the more interesting bits related to findings and discussions about the relevance of the research. If you know you have just 10 or 15 minutes to present your research, why not spend the bulk of your time on presenting a couple of significant findings? This is what I stress if ever I'm asked to give advice on presenting at conferences; and the same applies to writing. In addition, I encourage the writer/speaker to think about their audience, rather than listening to potentially destructive internal voices (of shame and 'shoulds') which work against creative inspiration.

As I say this, I am aware of my own critical voice that says I 'shouldn't' be writing these personal reflections in this academic article. Against that, my more rebellious, creative side urges me on, shouting "Why not be authentic and transparent?" I find myself hoping my readers – you – will find these reflective passages interesting rather than irritating. I can feel myself start to get blocked at the thought that my strategy could fail. To free myself, I decide that I can delete these sections later. I'll see what my peer reviewers advise…

Closely linked to having a 'hook' is the need for a clear 'storyline' (plot). This is all about offering readers a narrative they can grasp and hold onto as they read your article.

An example of a published journal article with a hook and declared storyline comes from the 2019 volume in this *European Journal of Qualitative Research for Psychotherapy*. Here, the author (Claire Mitchell) writes about 'flying dreams'. Many readers who have had flying dreams themselves – or who have clients who have had these dreams – are likely to be immediately captured by this fascinating topic. Mitchell goes on to highlight how research on this topic is scarce (offering a nice professional hook in the process). She then indicates her 'storyline', which is that she is going to report on some research she undertook on peoples' embodied experience of having flying dreams:

> Flying dreams are termed 'gravity dreams,' along with dreams that include falling, climbing, descending, and floating through air, water and stairs… Phenomenological studies looking at flying dreams are scarce, and this area of dreaming remains largely unexplored, despite gravity dreams being listed as one of the most commonly reported dreams. This study uses phenomenologically-orientated qualitative thematic analysis to explore the idiographic experience of the embodied self during an unassisted gravity dream. (Mitchell, 2019, p.60)

Planning your structure

The best academic writing has a logical structure that enables a story to unfold. Headings and sub-headings should help clarify the structure and enhance the flow. Structure refers to the order of ideas. Ideally there should be a smooth, flowing progression where different sections and paragraphs follow on from one another. This enables the argument to be presented in an orderly manner. Take a look at the way I've structured this article, considering the various headings I've used. Does the structure follow logically and make sense to you?

For another example, consider the structure within an article on a therapeutic technique. It would make sense to start by describing the technique, then move to discussing the research on that technique, before ending with an illustrative case study.

Most academic texts follow pre-established structures.

When it comes to structuring **academic essays**, writers are often advised to start with an introduction (where you 'say what you're going to say'), then progress to the core of the article (where you 'actually say it'), and finally tie things up in the conclusion (where you 'say what you've said'). I think this is too unhelpfully simplistic and mechanical. The introduction should aim to draw the reader in (with a 'hook'), rather than predict or prejudge what will follow. It is also where you indicate your structure or where you're going with your argument. The conclusion (if you have one) might summarise your argument or attempt to pull the paper together somehow.

How the middle is structured depends on the essay question. A *discussion* paper will usually contain a section exploring the case 'for' a particular position, followed by an 'against' section. A paper focused on *critical evaluation* will usually highlight 'strengths' and 'limitations'. Of course, it gets more complicated with different essay titles and there can be a choice of structures. For instance, *compare and contrast* type essays might start with a section on similarities between the things to 'compare', then look at 'differences'. Or you might choose to compare *and* contrast different aspects in turn.

Research papers, in contrast, commonly have pre-set sections, including variations of what's known as the IMRaD structure: Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion. Within each required section, there are prescribed norms. For instance, 'Methods' sections usually give information about research design, participant details, data collection/analysis procedures, and ethics. 'Discussion' sections often begin by discussing the findings before moving on to a critical evaluation of the methodology and a discussion of the relevance of the study.

Once you have a sense of your intended structure you can start to plan approximate **word counts** for each section. For a qualitative research article of around 6,000 words, the approximate word count for each section might look something like the following. (Note that requirements of different institutions vary considerably and there is scope with qualitative research to creatively vary this structure.)

- Introduction (personal and professional rationale for research) – 500 words
- Literature Review (empirical and theoretical rationale for research) – 1000 words
- Methodology (design and procedures) – 700 words
- Findings (results/analysis) – 1,300 words
- Discussion (about findings and critical evaluation) – 2,000 words
- Summary and conclusion – 500 words

Planning your structure and key sections in advance is important. It transforms the potentially overwhelming challenge of writing an article into more do-able, bite-sized pieces. It also means you don't waste time writing too much in one section; exceeding your word limit means you'll have to return later to edit material out.

Some authors, however, do not write from 'structure first' and prefer to free-flow with their writing initially. This can work too, particularly if the academic writing involves a narrative or story–telling. As Le Guin says:

> If you aren't a planner or a plotter, don't worry… The story boat is a magic one. It knows its course. The job of the person at the helm is to help it find its own way to wherever it's going. (Le Guin, 1998, p.118)

My approach with any writing starts with me working out a structure and an approximate word count (which can be adjusted later). I focus on a section at a time. It's much better to just write just a small section of a few hundred words rather than feel overwhelmed by the thought of having to write several thousand words!

To get me started, I usually start on the sections that are easier to write: for example, the Methods section for a research report.

With this article, I started off knowing I'd have four key sections linked to the 'stages' of academic writing and I had a sense that I'd want to keep each section within the range of 1,000–2,000 words. As I had this clear storyline, I decided that I didn't need a summarising conclusion, but I knew my introduction would be important to set the scene and do some signposting.

While my ability to write in a structured way is one of my writing strengths, I'm aware that not every mind works in this way. Some people prefer to work the other way around: they let their writing flow first and then determine a structure only after they have worked out what it is, they want to say.

Starting with structure is not always as easy as I'm making it out to be. Not all academic writing will follow set structures. I wonder if made that clear enough and have given space for authors to find their own way? As this question comes to mind, I'm reminded of a book I have read about how to write by Ursula Le Guin called 'Steering the craft'. She's one of my favourite authors ☺, I happily seek out her wise words to see if I can find a nice quotation to offer as a 'decoration'. And there it is… (see above!).

Planning your content

The planning of content can take many forms. You might start by **outlining** some key content. Or you could engage a free-flowing **brainstorm** where you note key words/phrases and ideas to be discussed. Some authors use mind-maps or other artful means to get the creative juices flowing. The point is to remain open and give oneself permission to speak. This is the start of finding your 'academic voice'.

Then it's about **accumulating content**. This can include noting down references to research; gathering forceful or elegant quotations; making random notes; finding concrete examples; and so on. I tend to accumulate scraps of paper with notes taken from different sources which I gradually stich together. Or you could be more systematic with your notes, perhaps putting them into a table or onto index cards. Some people write straight onto their computer; others do it long-hand first. It doesn't matter. You need to find *your* way – the one that works for you.

The key to planning your content is to be as clear as you can about what you want to say. I find it helpful to have 'three key points' I want to get across in the paper, or 'three key findings' I want to stress. Then it's about considering how best I can help others to gain insights into the topic in question. Am I seeking to convince and persuade? If so, what argument(s) should I be making?

When I construct an argument, I try to answer explicitly the "So what?" question. Has something new been learned? How does the argument add to, or deviate from, the way the topic is usually argued? What value is there in this understanding? What's the **significance** of my article? Will practice be enhanced by its publication? Mason (2002) suggests three steps towards making a good argument: select the data carefully; use that data imaginatively; then check that you're convinced by your argument.

My plan for content in this article is to show the iterative stages/tasks involved. My process is one where I scribble down key points I might want to emphasise in each stage. I then try to find a relevant academic reference for each stage – these will become my 'decorations'. I start with random scraps of notes, but then it's about generating the content – and full sentences – on the computer directly. Luckily, I'm a quick typist so I can think and write at the same time.

As I reflect on what I'm trying to do, I recognise the challenge and for a moment I wonder if it's too difficult a task and I almost derail myself. I'm aiming to encourage readers to write, so I'm 'selling' the process as being reasonably achievable. Yet I also want to show that its time-consuming hard work to get published without putting readers off. My task starts to feel too difficult and I quickly turn to writing a section that feels easier and more manageable.

Planning with word count in mind

Word counts are more than constraints on our writing voice. They indicate something about the focus and depth of content required. Knowing just how much space you have available to write gives you an important clue about what you need to say. Remember that you don't have to say everything you know about a topic in one article. It's about highlighting some things – *some*thing, not *every*thing.

I stress this very point when I'm asked to advise on how to translate an entire Masters/doctoral thesis of many thousands of words into a mere 6,000-word article. It's virtually impossible to take an entire doctorate and just edit judiciously to get it down to the required word length. It's much easier to start more simply with a limited agenda and then build on it, adding extra depth when you see that you have the space.

It's worth thinking about this some more. A **methodology** chapter in a doctoral thesis might itself be 5,000+ words and will probably include long paragraphs about epistemological commitments, chosen methodology, and a justification as to why other methodologies weren't chosen. Little of that will be needed in the methodology section of an article. Instead, knowing you have just a few hundred words available, you might just indicate your methodological commitments in a few sentences but then concentrate on giving an account what you actually did (i.e. your data collection/analysis method).

Similarly, thinking about your **results** ('findings') section, it might be advisable to re-write or re-present your findings for the purposes of the article. I once saw a qualitative dissertation which had 4 superordinate themes each with 6 subthemes – in other words, 24 themes in all. For the doctorate, it was an impressive analysis, but it doesn't translate easily into an article. It would be almost impossible to present such an elaborate thematic structure clearly, and manage any real substance, in just a thousand or so words.

It can sometimes help to take a step back from your writing and think about your reader and what will interest them. You don't want to make them work too hard to get your point. Certainly, trying to get a handle on 24 themes is likely to be too demanding. Instead of forcing them to sift through many themes, hit them with a handful of powerful/interesting themes which you then eloquently elaborate with a judicious use of quotations from participants to act as evidence.

Writing as 'Crafting and Grafting'

Key tip:
Writing involves both craft and graft. Its simultaneously a creative endeavour and a practical one. An artist doesn't produce a painting in one sitting – they build it up, perhaps starting by doing a pencil outline sketch and then they slowly add layers of paint.

Freeing your words; finding your voice

Once you have done your thinking and planning, you are ready to begin writing. You might imagine you start at the beginning and keep writing until the end. My advice on that is "Don't!" Academic writers usually engage a more fragmented, piecemeal process – it's about 'crafting and grafting'.

My approach is to take it section by section. If I can, I'll break the section itself down into sub-sections (for instance, when I wrote the section above on 'planning', five different sub-sections emerged, starting with 'sharpening your focus'). Then I just write a paragraph or two in each sub-section. I simply write as I talk without worrying too much about spelling and grammar or the elegance of what I'm saying. It's about just making a start, knowing that whatever you note down can be edited later.

With this article, I started with the first 'Thinking' section to get me going. Then I went straight to the 'Manuscript creation' section at the end, as I knew I could write that quickly. (The abstract and introduction will be the last bits I write).

As I reflect on this process, I see that it involves much more than just a mechanical application of steps. I'm intrigued when I recognise how much work goes into 'self-management' when writing. More than self-discipline, it's about finding ways to ground oneself so you're approaching the task with a clear head. In transactional analysis terms, I write when I'm in 'Adult', not 'Child'. Of course, my 'Child' kicks off periodically (for instance, feeling shame which then means my writing ceases). Then, 'she' needs to be handled.

But what happens if you get stuck and you're unable to find the words? **Writing blocks** can strike even the most experienced of writers. It can be useful to probe your process, as blocks give us important information. What exactly is getting in your way? (Evans 2013).

A sense of shame or inadequacy, where we don't feel worthy or good/skilled enough, can act as a major block to writing. It is worth delving in deeper. What introjects (i.e. attitudes internalised from others) might be holding you back, perhaps even paralysing you? Describing the anguish many students feel about academic writing, belle hooks [the lack of capitals is deliberate], a noted cultural critic and activist writer, notes how negative past experiences can contribute to this sense of unworthiness:

> Throughout my twenty years of teaching at a number of universities I have witnessed the terror and anguish many students feel about writing. Many acknowledge that their hatred and fear of writing surface in grade school…reaching a paralysing peak in the college years. (hooks, 1999, p.169)

To tackle a writing block, try setting yourself some realistically achievable goals: for example, "I will write the 500-word conclusion today". You can also free yourself up by doing some warm-up writing exercises when you first sit down (Murray, 2013). Perhaps you could write a quick paragraph on 'what I'd like to achieve today'?

Many writers recommend engaging in more generative strategies such as doing regular *free writing* (perhaps doing 10 minutes daily) (Evans 2013). Goldberg (1986, p.8) offers some valuable advice on how to do this:

> Keep to a time limit.
> Keep your hand moving.
> Don't cross out.
> Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, grammar.
> Lose control.
> Don't think. Don't get logical.
> Go for the jugular (if something comes up in your writing that is scary or naked, dive right into it. It probably has lots of energy).

If your writing block proves difficult to shift, I recommend doing some further practical writing exercises (see Evans, 2013 for some ideas). Also, maybe your writing partner can help form your words (Murray, 2013). For example, I once helped someone write who was stuck by asking them what they wanted to say and simply typing their words as they spoke to me. It all came out reasonably fluently when they were speaking to me! It gave that individual a first draft to work on, even if they had lots to do later.

Once you've written your various sections, it's then a matter of stitching them all together. Here, it's vital to remain aware of the goals of the article. Might it be good to give greater emphasis to certain points? What about bits that aren't especially relevant: is it perhaps better to cut them out?

At this stage of finalising your content, remember that you don't have to state everything you know. Be selective. I give this advice to student trainees who are writing their course work 'case study'. It is clearly impossible to cover everything about the client and the therapy in just a few thousand words. But that's not what you're trying to do. Just concentrate on the story you're trying to tell and on the quality of what you've written, rather than worry about what you've left out.

Sharpening and polishing your language

Once you've got your first decent draft of the content pulled together, it's time to start polishing your language. This is the stage where you concentrate on the writing itself. Aim for short, clear sentences and coherent, smoothly linked paragraphs (Fish, 2011; Murray, 2013). Online grammar checkers like '*Grammarly*' can be helpful here.

Try to avoid clichés and boring, over-jargonised writing. Instead, seek to write in a lively, inviting fashion, using words and phrases that add colour and nuance to your writing. In general, use the active voice rather than the passive one (e.g. "Jane wrote an article" rather than "An article was written by Jane"). Is there a more creative way you can put a particular idea across? Are you tending to repeat or overuse certain words? Can you find another word? Is that sentence perhaps a bit too long? Could you use five words instead of ten?

I realise that it would be better to model this editing process. Here is a sentence from the 'abstract' section in this article. See how I edited an initially 'wordy' couple of sentences down to one? The final version is sharper and more active:

> *1st draft: "I start with offering some detailed 'how to write' steps for each stage of the writing process. The dynamic iterative movement involved between thinking and planning, and then continually revising and developing the writing will be emphasised." (37 words)*
>
> *Edited: "Detailed 'how to' steps are suggested for each stage, always with an emphasis on the dynamic movement between thinking/planning and revising/developing." (21 words)*

Good writing is the way you engage with your reader, at both an intellectual and a personal level (Halling, 2002). It's therefore, not only about grammar (despite what you may have been taught at school). It's also about being stylish in your choice of language and about putting your ideas and arguments across in articulate, interesting ways. It's about being concise rather than longwinded, precise rather than vague, coherent rather than confusing…

Remember those clever but totally dull, dry, dreary, jargon-ridden academic articles – the ones where you couldn't get beyond the first page? That's obviously what you want to avoid.

As you strive to be more 'writerly', it's helpful to take a closer look at articles you yourself have found interesting and readable. Think about the strategies the author has used to make their article accessible (Evans, 2013).

I quite enjoy this phase of language sharpening. For one thing, it was immensely satisfying to trim 683 words off my initial all-too-wordy draft of this article. But the process of sharpening my language is also quite stimulating (in fact, I'd say 'fun'). For instance, I originally had the heading above as 'honing your language'. While honing seemed a nice word, a critical reader pointed out that readers who don't have English as a first language may stumble on it. My trusted online Thesaurus offered me 'sharpening' and 'polishing'. So much better! Similarly, I spot that I've been overusing the word 'interesting'. There are so many alternatives to swap it for: 'stimulating', 'thought-provoking', 'fascinating', 'curious', 'intriguing'…the possibilities run on.

Writing this, I'm aware of an underlying bubbling discomfort. I'm leaving my comfort zone and have some hesitancy about setting myself up as somehow being a 'writer'. Most of us psychotherapists are not gifted professional writers. ***And it's not necessary to be an especially good writer to write decent academic articles****. It's mainly about being clear and straightforward in putting across your message. However, writing well certainly helps readers engage with you.*

I reflect further on how I try to be more 'writerly'. My main resource is the Thesaurus. I also tend to bring metaphors and visual imagery into my writing. In the section above, for example, I use the word 'trim', a hair-cutting metaphor, to express the way we 'cut' words. But I'm also aware of having edited out other metaphors. I know I can go over the top here. ☹ *Using too many metaphors can be distracting for readers and they're culturally loaded so we need to be careful that our readers will interpret them in the way we mean. (One critical reviewer noted that one of the metaphors I had thought to use might be disturbing for some. That was helpful advice and I deleted it.)*

Writing is a skill and craft that can be learned to a degree. As you strive to find your own style and voice, remember to keep your writing clear and accessible. In time, you may – or may not – attain some degree of literary stylishness but that should not be your primary goal with academic writing. It would be different if you were trying to write a novel. I like Richardson's (1994) idea that academic writing is itself linked to a process of inquiry. Arguing that writers' self-knowledge and understanding of their topic develops through writing, she encourages individuals to "accept and nurture their own voices" (Richardson, 1994, p.523).

Grafting

Having drafted and edited your article, it might help to put it away for a few days before you return to do a final edit. With a little distance it is easier to see your words afresh. Your critical readers can also help by indicating passages that are less clear or appealing.

The key things to attend to at this stage are as follows:

1) Ensure your **title** is clear and informative. (*Tip:* If you can, try to make it punchy, intriguing, or thought-provoking. Offer a 'hook').
2) Aim to have a clear, sharp **abstract**. This is the part of your article which will be read the most and it is important in setting up your storyline and structure for the reader. (*Tip:* With a research report, the abstract should include a summary paragraph of: i. the aim of the research, ii. Your methods, iii. findings, and iv. conclusion).
3) Aim for a concise conclusion or ending section, ideally which draws your article together and offers a strong **'take-home' message** about the significance of the article and what it contributes. If possible, try to leave the reader with a sense of completion or a positive feeling. (*Tip*: The worst ending for a qualitative research report is to say that the findings "cannot be generalised".)
4) Ensure that your **referencing** is rigorous and complete (Murray, 2013). It's vital to avoid plagiarism, or the appearance of plagiarism. (*Tip*: When you copy words from a book/article into your notes, always put it in quotations then and there, or immediately paraphrase the content).

That last point about referencing is critical. You need to take special care to ensure you have attributed all your sources and haven't inadvertently plagiarised (copied) someone else's work. When reading other people's work, it's all too easy to write notes – and subsequently incorporate them in your own article, forgetting to put them into your own words. Similarly, we can inadvertently write about an idea and give the impression that it's our own original thinking, forgetting to give authors the respect and acknowledgement they are due for their ideas. This is part of that community dialogue I spoke about earlier.

The good news about the grafting phase is that you don't need to get things 'right' or 'be perfect'. For example, when I'm teaching students to do academic writing, I draw a parallel with putting up a Christmas tree. Start with getting the tree up (structure) and the main decorations such as the lights and balls (main content). You can always add more 'bling' (in the form of academic references, quotes, references to theory) as you go along.

Manuscript Creation

Key tip:
Submitting a journal article involves dealing with a wider system where you are required to follow certain rules and procedures. It helps to view this stage as the start of you dialoguing with the wider community.

Submission

Journals vary considerably in what they require in terms of formatting and submission. Most journals have detailed style and submission **guidelines** and it is very important to follow the guidelines of your chosen journal judiciously and precisely (Murray 2013).

When it comes to formatting issues, you will need to consider things like font size, layout requirements and, most important, referencing style. For instance, what referencing citation system does your journal use? Harvard? APA? Vancouver? Just follow the required formula (and perhaps use a software program for editing citations such as *Mendeley* or *EndNote*). Yes, it can be laborious to attend to details like where full stops and italics go, but you're going to have to engage that process sometime. You don't want to irritate the editor by seeming to ignore their *Author Guidelines*.

When it comes to the **submission** itself, you might be asked to provide both a 'blind' (i.e. anonymised) copy of your article and an attributed one (with your name and other details on it).

Depending on the submission guidelines, you may need to have a separate title page where you include your author details plus a statement that there are no competing interests, etc. These would all normally be uploaded to the journal website. You should get a formal acknowledgment in response to your submission.

After that it's a question of waiting for peer reviewer comments (assuming it goes through a peer review system). That process can take several weeks or even months.

Often peer reviewers and the journal editor will play a significant role in further developing your article. It's reassuring that there's no need for your article to be in super-polished form when you first send it in.

While you are waiting, how about signing up to be a peer reviewer with one or two journals? Acting as a reviewer for journals can offer a useful apprenticeship for academic writing.

The review process

> If you want to get something published, and it's half-decent, you will. But it needs resilience, responsiveness, and a willing to put up with a lot of knockbacks. (Cooper, 2019)

Once the journal editor has received the peer reviews, they will send these on to you (anonymously), perhaps together with a synthesis of the comments. At the same time, they will give you their decision about whether your article is accepted/rejected and what changes they require.

At this point, take a deep breath, let the comments settle… and try not to take any criticisms too personally. If you can, set your ego aside, and focus on the fact that the reviewers are usually striving to improve your article constructively.

Whether or not your article is accepted, it is useful to analyse the feedback. What are they asking for, and why? Even if your article gets rejected there could still be useful information there to help you revise the article to submit elsewhere (Murray 2013).

As editor of this journal, I requested an extra-rigorous review process for this article, involving several peer reviews where reviewers knew I was the author and I knew their identity, plus two further anonymous reviews.

I breathed a big sigh of relief when the recommendation from all was "to publish with edits". That they all saw value in my article was encouraging. They seemed to like my personal process reflections so that felt a good validation. There were many suggestions offered for improving the article further, e.g. "explain what this means" or "say more about…". I was pleased overall to be challenged to do better while ruefully acknowledged to myself that the many 'minor edits' requested were actually going to take more than a few hours to sort.

Cooper gives some useful advice:

> Pay particular attention to any points flagged up by the editor. Ultimately it will be their decision whether or not to accept your paper, so if they're asking you to attend to some particular issues, make sure you do so.
>
> Resubmissions go back through the online portal. If the changes required are relatively minor, it may just be the editor looking over them; anything more substantive and they'll go back to the reviewers again for comment. Bear in mind that the reviewers are often the original ones who looked at your paper, so ignore their comments at your peril. (Cooper, 2019)

When you eventually re-submit, highlight your edits in some way to show how you have conscientiously addressed the reviewers' comments (or note where you respectfully disagree with them), perhaps in a separate letter or table. Remember that you can use the editor for support. For instance, I often ask editors for their suggestions if I'm confronted with contradictory peer reviewer recommendations.

It can be hard to have your article criticised by external peer reviewers, or even rejected outright. Inevitably such rejections can hit our shame and self-esteem buttons.

Over the years I have had several articles rejected outright. Mostly, but not always, I 'take it on the chin'. Perhaps, I think to myself, it was the wrong choice of journal. Some journals are simply not open to the type of creative, reflexive formats and qualitative research work that I favour. I can feel regret and frustration, but I comfort myself with the understanding that wider issues are likely to be involved and that this is not a personal rejection.

*However, sometimes it **is** a personal rejection. I've had some critical comments from reviewers that were distinctly harsh and dismissive, and I can still feel those sore parts of me which got hurt in response. Once when I received unhelpful comments and an outright rejection, a colleague encouraged me to submit the same article elsewhere (to an even more prestigious journal). It was published within a couple of months, without any changes! That was a good reminder about the subjectivity of the academic process.*

In case I'm confirming your worst fears about getting critical feedback, I can honestly say that most peer reviewer comments are encouraging, constructive, and supportive – certainly that is an explicit aim of this European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy. I also know that my articles will be improved by the changes suggested and that encourages me.

Handover

When your manuscript **finally** gets accepted (you may have had to revise it a couple of times to get here), the bad news is that there is more work to do. Again, it varies according to journal, but many journals have both copy editing and proof editing processes to navigate.

Personally speaking, I dislike this end stage of dealing meticulously with the minutiae (with an eye to detail). [Yes, that is a strange thing for an editor-author to say. This is just not my strength!]

Inevitably there are little typos, text inconsistencies, and both punctuation and referencing errors, etc., which need to be tidied up. I remember feeling quite embarrassed when the first article I submitted using APA referencing came back with corrections needed for every single reference and that was after I had checked them and thought they were correct!

The grafting process can feel laborious. But at the end of it all – with luck – comes that glorious, infinitely satisfying moment when you see your article in print. 👍

So… You've done your thinking, planning, crafting and grafting, and you've submitted your manuscript to your chosen journal. You've edited, re-edited, polished, and proof-read. All that labour is worth it when you see the final, shiny published piece.

Don't forget to CELEBRATE!

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