

Essential Writing Tools for Building a Scholarly Foundation in Higher Education

Kelli R. Paquette

Department of Professional Studies in Education
College of Education and Educational Technology

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Indiana, PA 15705

Introduction

Immediately following the doctoral defense, the newly-affirmed, "Dr." Rearick, exclaimed, "Thank goodness, the dissertation is done. That has been enough writing to last me a lifetime!" Little did she know that eight months later she would accept a tenure-track position in an institution of higher education which necessitated a change of attitude about the art of writing. In actuality, the day she defended was the day that the professional responsibility of researching, writing, and contributing to the educational field had truly begun.

Writing for publication can be intimidating. Newly-hired, tenure-track university professors may have experienced similar situations to that of Dr. Rearick. After a successful doctoral defense, an initial and brief period of relief is followed by the startling realization that the researching and writing frenzy is just beginning. Anxiety, apprehension, or primal fear may spread through one's soul when thinking about the daunting task of writing. Knowing that publishing in refereed journals is usually necessary for successful careers in higher education can be overwhelming. However, just as knowledgeable contractors understand how tools work and use the appropriate ones for various building tasks; scholarly writers must understand the required tools for high-quality intellectual writing and use those tools on a daily basis to add important, scholarly written material to their professional fields of study. This article is written to provide the essential writing tools for building a successful scholarly foundation in higher education.

Authors' Tools for Writing Projects

Design a personal writing blueprint: Identify your passion and start writing!

Sometimes the hardest part about writing is selecting a topic and getting started. So, just sit down and begin writing. Write about topics that interest and motivate you, rather than searching for trends of the moment (Huff, 1999; Jalongo, 2002). When one writes about matters of professional and personal importance, the message can be made clearly and emphatically. Make your writing passion a "hot topic." When selecting a writing topic, consider these three factors: one's formal education, work experience, and personal and professional interests. Jalongo (2002) suggested that a triple Venn diagram be drawn to assist a writer in analyzing one's writing strengths. Consider, "What topic is at the intersection of your education, work, and interests?" (p. 24).

Another technique used to design one's writing blueprint is to review the substance of conference presentations. In preparing conference proposals and presentations, recently-published information is

usually gathered and distributed. Conference presenters give a great deal of thought to particular topics. So, after a session is delivered, consider the audience's comments and questions. Use presented conference materials and audience's comments and questions to begin drafting an article for publication. This approach is effective in motivating one to begin the writing process.

Writers may hesitate to begin the writing process because they hold negative attitudes about writing or they perceive themselves as poor writers. Some people simply don't like to write because it is difficult for them (McConnell, 1999). A "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" scenario develops. "Do they dislike writing because it is difficult for them, or is writing difficult for them because they dislike it?" (McConnell, 1999, pg. 74). The more one writes the greater the possibility exists for becoming a better writer. The task of writing is obviously more difficult for some than for others, as people vary in writing skill abilities (Jalongo, 2002). But, take comfort in knowing that "there are relatively few 'natural writers' in the world, and what is often referred to as a 'talent' for writing is usually a level of skill that has emerged as a result of hard work" (McConnell, 1990, p. 74). Know that real writers actively choose to write (Huff, 1999), and "real writers are much more likely to adopt the attitude of 'just get up and do the work'" (Jalongo, 2002, p. 29).

Pack the toolbox proficiently: Demonstrate knowledge of "good writing" skills

Many current writers have developed into successful authors in spite of minimal or weak writing instruction and modeling in their undergraduate or graduate years. Appreciate that writing is a process and it continually evolves, and recognize that it is necessary to understand the elements of high-quality writing. In order to become an outstanding writer, one must have a clear picture of what makes good writing even better. Being knowledgeable about the 6+1 writing traits model is a first step (Culham, 2003; 2005). The traits work together to formulate high-quality and publishable written work. These six characteristics include ideas, organization, word choice, voice, sentence fluency, and conventions. The +1 refers to the actual publishing or sharing of text. Contribute to professional fields by writing and publishing practical articles for practitioners, research reports documenting original data, or theoretical or research reviews of the literature.

Ideas

When developing an article, understand and explain thoroughly the message to be conveyed. Hammer ideas and content so that the meaning accurately portrays the author's writing intent (Vanderwaall, 2004). Be clear, specific, and provide enough details to fully explain the concept and use jargon easily identified by the audience. It is also important to not exaggerate favorable data or withhold information that does not favor the writer's purpose (Brewer, et al. 2004). Asking a friend who is unfamiliar in the field to read through the document to see if it "makes sense" is also a great idea.

Organization

Recognize the importance of organization. First and foremost, the title should grab the audience's attention and tell the story in a few carefully selected words. Huff (1999) noted to provide a brief, informative, and memorable title. Once you have the reader's attention, a well-crafted and planned article will keep them reading. Designing an outline can help many writers stay focused (Huff, 1999). The outline should provide structure; however, flexibility may be employed as authors' novel thoughts are created through the writing process. Organization is important because one must be able to read and decipher the printed text easily and smoothly (Culham, 2003, 2005).

Word Choice

Carefully selected words which accurately depict the author's intent assist the reader to hear the author's voice. Use words and phrases that are precise, descriptive words that paint mind pictures, and

verbs to create lively, energetic voices (Culham, 2005). Using dictionaries and thesauruses will enhance written and oral communication skills synergistically.

Voice

Voice is the author's passion for the topic coming through the printed text (Culham, 2003; 2005). When selecting unambiguous terminology, one's voice will prevail throughout the content. It is important to use precise word choice in order to nail down one's voice (Vanderwaall, 2004).

Sentence Fluency

Sentence fluency is the rhythm and flow of well-crafted sentences. It is the building block of well-constructed written work. The reader should be able to read through the written work effortlessly. Varying sentence length keeps the reader engaged (Culham, 2003, 2005). Huff (1999) suggested reading the article out loud to make sure it reads easily.

Conventions

The final trait of conventions is very critical. Correct punctuation, capitalization, grammar and usage, and spelling are the nuts and bolts of all publishable text (Vanderwaall, 2004). Before submitting an article, put it away for a few days. Then, get it out and carefully and thoroughly edit the work with fresh eyes and a clear head.

The Writing Process

The road through the writing process is traveled at varying speeds; however, it is important to note that high quality writing does, indeed, follow a specific route. Brewer, et al., (2004) noted that writers go through a multi-step process: pre-writing, writing, and re-writing. In the pre-writing stage, authors use wide-reading, talking, and listening to gather ideas for writing. Huff (1999) suggested, "Think before you write. Then, write to help you rethink" (p. 8). In the writing stage, writers write voraciously. In the re-writing stage, authors revise their work repeatedly. Although the number of rewrites will vary, it is not unusual to have more than ten. The re-writing stage can be lengthy.

Work with the crew: Collaborate with colleagues

Collaborative, positive, and professional relationships with colleagues are critical in one's growth as a writer. Look around your department and watch and learn from those who have established thriving writing careers. Ask yourself, "How are they doing it? What are they doing that I am not?" In addition to watching one's colleagues, talk with them. Talking helps to clarify thoughts and can be exercised during the pre-writing, writing, or re-writing processes. Huff (1999) advised to not expect colleagues to review lengthy, time-consuming articles. However, when trusting relationships are formed between colleagues, it can be mutually beneficial for both parties to help each other with writing projects.

Co-writing with colleagues is another avenue in which some writers enjoy. When a shared researching and writing interest occurs, it may make sense to complement each other's styles and pull resources together. As long as workload roles are well-defined, opportunities prevail for both writers to study, learn, and write together successfully. Communicating with productive colleagues is a powerful writing tool.

Check the housing market: Review the literature and journal fields

Before new housing developments are built, much time and effort is given to researching the adjacent housing areas and to the feasibility of new housing projects, in general. In regards to writing, knowing what has already been written about your topic of interest is extremely significant. One can build upon those studies which have been documented, and can integrate some of the information to support and to substantiate one's written work.

Additionally, knowing and understanding the highly-respected, peer-reviewed journals in one's field is equally important. It is beneficial to read the journals and to understand the audiences to whom the journals serve (McConnell, 1999). Consideration must be given to the audience's educational levels, needs as readers, commonly encountered problems, and common, comfortable language (McConnell, 1999). Similar to particular designs of housing floor plans, journals hold specific publication styles. Prospective authors' styles must correspond accordingly.

Reviewing exemplars is one effective method to use when analyzing a journal's form and style (Madsen, 2008; Huff, 1999). An exemplar can be viewed as a model. It is already documented in the literature and it may accomplish the same type of writing task that you are attempting. Although the content may be different, the way in which the exemplar is introduced or organized may help you as you contribute to specific journals. Once the article is written in the correct style and format, submission time has arrived.

When submitting an article, it is necessary to remember this command, "Follow the directions." Although these words have been used by classroom teachers for years, understand that they apply to writers of all ages. Follow the journal's submission guidelines precisely and do not waver from the written directions. (Huff, 1999; Jalongo, 2002). By following the guidelines specifically, the possibility of receiving an acceptance letter increases.

Rebuild without hesitation: Revise and resubmit

While exposing stories about the effects of natural disasters, such as, floods, tornadoes, or hurricanes, many news reporters have captured memorably sad moments of those who have suffered the devastating loss of their homes. When asked, "What will you do next?" the answer often given without hesitation is, "We will rebuild." Determination, discipline and perseverance are characteristic of these rebuilders, as well as many multi-published writers.

When revising, it is recommended that one begins initial reads at various segments of the text. For instance, start a writing session by reading the conclusion first. The conclusion must be as strong and effective as the introduction (Huff, 1999, p. 93, McConnell, 1999). Leads, transitions, and endings are all equally important (Vanderwaall, 2004) and sufficient time and attention should be given to these portions of the text, too.

Undoubtedly, preparing a manuscript for submission is a time-consuming endeavor which can be quite stressful (Brewer, Marmon, & McMahan-Landers, 2004). However, the rewards outweigh those moments of exhaustion. Inevitably, those who submit works for publication review will receive their share of rejections. However, it is important to use the editors' comments and learn from them. Often meticulous and detailed comments reflect the amount of time and effort given to the manuscript by the reviewers (McConnell, 1999). "Revise and resubmit" is a concept which every writer will address at some point or other. So, consider Huff's (1999) advice, "Do not fall in love with everything you have written. Be willing to revise and reorganize every word of every draft" (p. 176). Then, submit your article and relish in the temporary moment of success. You are one step closer to the possibility of publication.

Conclusion

Although there may be moments of doubt, know that being simultaneously productive in both teaching and research can be accomplished (Fairweather, 2002). Through researching, writing, and publishing activities, faculty can be motivated and assisted in becoming and remaining scholarly teachers (Madsen, 2008). To be successful in this intellectual endeavor, one must identify a topic of interest and start writing, understand the traits of high-quality writing, collaborate with colleagues, review the literature and journals, and be willing to revise and resubmit. These are vital writing components. Through the proper use, management, and maintenance of the essential writing tools for building a scholarly foundation, one might actually find themselves enjoying the writing construction process.

End Note

Using the essential writing tools as defined in this article, Dr. Rearick had published seven articles in international, national, or regional peer-reviewed journals, (two solely and five co-jointly), and she co-authored a book chapter for an early childhood international association. These writing accomplishments were completed by the end of her fourth year in higher education. The foundation for a successful writing career has been constructed. Future writing possibilities are endless.

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