

Joy de Jong

Effective Strategies for Academic Writing

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Effective Strategies for Academic Writing

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Joy de Jong

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Preface

Effective Strategies for Academic Writing is the English edition of my *Handboek academisch schrijven* (Handbook Academic Writing), published in 2011 by Coutinho. This English edition is based on the same principles as the Dutch version:

- much attention is paid to the **process** of academic writing;
- it contains **step-by-step instructions** for the various sub-activities;
- there are elaborate procedures for narrowing down the topic and for carefully formulating the relevance and the central question and sub-questions (**picturing your research**);
- the material is **broadly applicable** to different writing assignments and multiple disciplines.

The English edition is suitable for Bachelor and Master students but also for PhD students. The book was written with the European university context in mind, but it will prove useful for writers outside Europe as well.

Extensive experience with Bachelor, Master, and PhD students has taught me that academic writers benefit mainly from strategies that help them work in a more structured and therefore more efficient way. This affects **structure** on three levels: (1) the structure of the writing process, (2) the structure of the research, and (3) the structure of the text. They form the three main subjects of this book. The steps and strategies described provide structure to the **writing process**. For the structure of the **research**, I use the structure model of the central research problem by Heinze Oost (1999, p. 300). This part of the book (chapters 3–6) can be regarded as a tribute to my great Utrecht mentor Heinze Oost. By creating this template, he has provided an important instrument for designing a sound research plan. Lastly, the structure of the **text** is discussed in the final three chapters on outlining, writing, and rewriting.

I thank everyone at Coutinho Publishers, my colleagues at Radboud in'to Languages, and the Nijmegen Centre for Academic Writing for their support and co-readership. Working with translator Patrick Graman proved both pleasant and instructive. Finally, I owe my gratitude to the PhD students from Wageningen, Nijmegen, and universities in various African countries. They have provided me with new insights into their writing situation and stimulated me to refine strategies and templates.

I hope that this book will be a helpful and useful support for writers in an academic context. All comments and suggestions that lead us closer to that goal are more than welcome.

Joy de Jong

Utrecht, November 2016

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Introduction

Content and goal of this book

This book is about academic writing. It is intended as a tool to help you write assignments and tasks in a scientific context. Examples of these include papers, essays, reviews, research plans, grant proposals, journal articles, and theses. This book deals with academic writing tasks where

- 1 the **content** is based on scientific research;
- 2 the text is intended for an **audience** of scientists.

Academic writing tasks may vary in all kinds of ways: in size (hours, pages), supervision, type of research, topics, goals, text features (structure, style), et cetera. This book takes this diversity into account, so the guidelines provided are useful in different phases (Bachelor, Master, PhD), for different genres and different disciplines.

Organization of the book

The goal of the book is to offer you tools to carry out academic writing assignments. The chapters describe the steps that you need to take in order to accomplish them successfully. Please keep in mind, however, that you will probably still have to move back and forth between the different parts and chapters, especially if you are working on a larger task.

A central position in the book is occupied by the various structure aspects. Chapter 1 explicitly deals with the structure of the writing process. In chapter 2 you will find steps and questions to help you clarify your task – what is expected of you in terms of procedures, processes, and products. Once you have a clear picture of that, you can work more efficiently.

When you have set the scene of the task at hand, you can move to planning your research. This is covered by the chapters in part 2. At this point you determine the structure of your research: you narrow the topic down to a suitable central question and decide how you are going to answer that question. This is a crucial phase in academic writing; most of the problems in academic writing can be traced back to an insufficiently detailed main structure for the research. Even when you have already finished your research, it can make sense to map the main structure once again before you start writing. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 deal with designing a proper structure; for that purpose, they offer step-by-step procedures, background information, and examples. In chapter 6, the same is done for short writing assignments.

After the planning, you carry out the research: collecting, processing, and interpreting data. In part 3 we will deal with this, but only as far as literature research is concerned. The way you handle empirical research is strongly determined by the methodology in your academic field. That is why you should consult methodological handbooks on the type of research that you are conducting. Chapter 6 deals with doing research for short writing assignments and also offers planning guidelines specific to such assignments. Reading is also a form of research, and many writers tend to tackle this in a less than efficient way. In chapter 7 you can find some effective reading strategies. Feedback is a powerful tool in writing processes, at least if you deploy it at the right time and in a proper way. Strategies are included in chapter 8.

The final part of the academic writing process is the actual writing – reporting the research. Chapters 9 through 11, which make up part 4, cover this topic. They explicitly deal with writing a text that is meant for someone else. In the phases prior to this one, you have already written down all kinds of things; if you haven't, you run the risk of forgetting a lot. However, the writing you have done thus far is mainly for yourself and perhaps also for supervisory meetings. In chapter 9 we assume that you are able to take writing one step further: writing for a different reader. The book also offers strategies for that type of writing: to set the scene and get started, to make an outline, to write a first draft (chapter 9), to revise the content and the structure of the text (chapter 10), to revise the style, and to finish the text (chapter 11).

How can you use this book?

This book is more of a workbook than a reading book. It is most effective when you set to work with the strategies after you have read about them. It is recommended for each step, however, that you go through the entire section or chapter before you carry out the step itself.

Since a complex process such as academic writing seldom follows a tight and perfectly predictable schedule, it is not unusual to find yourself having to go back a few pages every now and then. For example, you may have to skip back to elements of the research plan (chapters 3-6) while you are making an outline (chapter 9).

This book is meant to serve you in different writing tasks and assignments. If you are doing a short assignment, you will probably not study the entire book; that is something you can do when you start working on a thesis or a journal article. That means you can use it more than once in your academic life.

Explanation of the pictograms



This pictogram accompanies references to study material on this book's website.

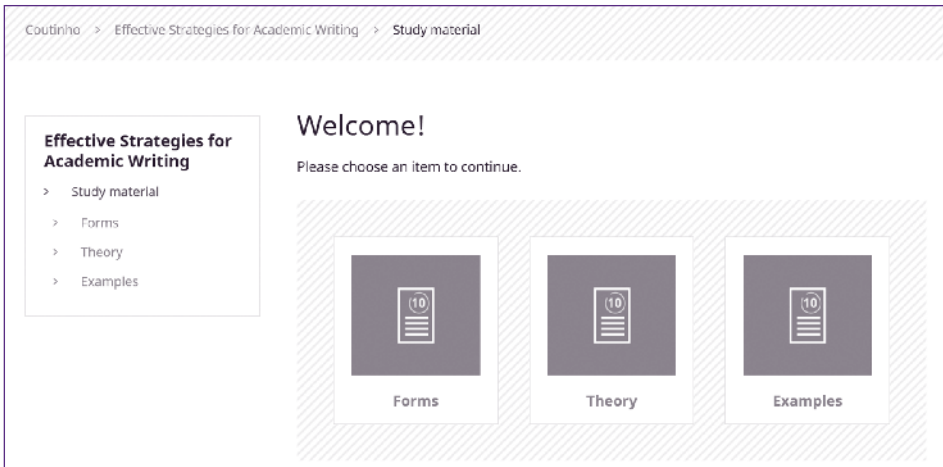


This pictogram accompanies the lists of writing steps.

Website

On www.coutinho.nl/effectivestrategies you will find the online study material accompanying this book. This material consists of:

- forms and templates for the different steps of the writing process, which you can fill in yourself;
- extra theory;
- extra examples.



I

Setting the scene: procedures, process, and product

The what, why, and how of getting started

What?

When you have a writing task, it is worth the effort to find out what exactly the work entails. This is the part in which you assess the work at hand. The purpose of this part is to get an overview of:

- the procedure: how is everything arranged?
- the process: which activities are required/allowed and which are not?
- the product: which requirements should the text meet?

Why?

Do we even need such an overview? Can't you just start? Not if you want to work efficiently. If you were simply to start, you would run the risk of not fulfilling the task well enough. You wouldn't be the first writer to have to start again because the professor, supervisor, or journal turns out to have completely different expectations than you. By assessing the situation properly, you have a better chance of knowing what to submit, how, and when.

How?

Information on an academic writing task should be provided by the professor, the department, the supervisor, or the journal. That means you need to actively look for manuals and instructions and read course books and syllabuses. Your professor or supervisor may give you additional information. Sample texts prove to be very informative to obtain a picture of what the product (the text) is supposed to look like.

1 The writing process: dos and don'ts

1.1 Introduction: your own writing process

1.2 Pitfalls for academic writers

1.2.1 Doing too much at once

1.2.2 Working without a plan

1.3 Writing strategies; more or less effective

1.4 Tips to take on the challenges

1.5 Misconceptions to dispel

1

The writing process: dos and don'ts

1.1 Introduction: your own writing process

Academic writing does not always come easily. That is why so many books are written on the subject. Unlike most writing books, which start with the moment you write your first draft, this book devotes a lot of attention to the activities that precede that moment. Think of things like planning those activities, finding out what the framework is and which requirements are relevant, determining exactly what your research is about, carrying out your research, and preparing the writing (planning the text). The way you carry out those activities determines to a great extent how the entire writing process will take place and what the text will be like.

Before you continue reading about pitfalls and tips, it is sensible to take a minute and reflect on how this process normally goes in your case. Which steps do you undertake and how does that work out for you?



For that purpose, you should complete the table below. You can also download a version that you can fill in via the website (Your writing process, under 'Forms'). Imagine you start writing the article or chapter, or if you have already started, reconstruct how you went about it.

Table 1.1

What exactly do you do? For example: go for a walk, make an outline, arrange articles around you, simply write ...	How does that work for you? What works for you? What does not work for you?	Can you think of why some things work for you and why some things do not?
1		
2		
et cetera		
a tip (or a 'do')		
a pitfall (or a 'don't')		

1.2 Pitfalls for academic writers

Basically, there are only two big pitfalls for academic writers:

- 1 doing too many things at the same time;
- 2 working without a plan.

These two pitfalls are explained below. Tips to prevent them are included in section 1.4.

1.2.1 Doing too much at once

In the 1970s, two American psychologists, Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, studied how writers operate. They gave students an assignment such as 'write a piece about your work for the readers of the magazine *Seventeen*'. Students were given an hour to write the text. They had to do this 'thinking out loud': they expressed all their thoughts, which were recorded on tape. An analysis of these 'thinking aloud protocols' showed that writing is a very complex activity. For example, writers think about their assignment, about the content, the structure, and the language; they delve into their memories to retrieve all kinds of information; and on top of that, they reflect on the text they have already written. This entire process contains a high risk of 'cognitive overload', which may lead to the writer losing his hold on the writing process, or ending up with a bad product in an inefficient manner. Writers who did manage appeared to differ from weaker writers mainly in the way they handled the process: they planned more and were more goal-oriented.

If those writers struggle to produce a page and a half, how difficult will it be to produce an academic essay of 5 pages, an article of 15, or a thesis of 60 or even 300 pages? These texts are characterized by very complex content (scientific research) as well as a complex rhetorical situation (various critical readers with all kinds of interests and preferences that the writer is not always aware of). Such a process demands **segmenting** the task at hand. You need to divide the work into steps (sub-tasks, sub-activities) and work on them **one at a time**. It is impossible to think about the content of your story and word it in beautifully constructed sentences at the same time. You may easily find yourself in a situation where you start to doubt halfway through the first sentence. You sense that your supervisor is looking over your shoulder, knowing that she demands very precise wording at all times; you hear the voice of supervisor number two in your mind, knowing he insists on a research perspective from a certain paradigm. Didn't colleagues say the other day that the text could use some more peppiness? While you are writing, the questions keep surfacing: what was the convention on quoting literature again? Do you put a comma between the author and the year of publication? What is a synonym for the word 'reliable'?

that I have already used three times now? How on earth can I support that claim? Let's check that Brown article, let's check ... An hour later you compose yourself only to find you have read all kinds of material but produced only two sentences, if that.

1.2.2 Working without a plan

Working without a plan equals working without a goal. In order to end up with a good text, you need to develop different activities, including reading, writing, thinking, calculating, and consulting. These activities all have different goals in different phases. Here are some examples:

- 1 Reading can have the objective of finding out whether your research question has already been answered, of finding a proper definition, but also of finding an answer to your research question. Reading is also an activity you can easily lose yourself in, especially since virtually all literature is available by clicking a few buttons. If you fail to keep in mind **why** you are reading while you are searching for literature, you may soon wind up in an endless search through all kinds of interesting studies and theories that will not give you the answer you are looking for (see chapter 7). That is not an efficient way to tackle this issue.
- 2 Writing also may have various purposes. Sometimes you only write to **record** something, for example, considerations for making certain choices, interesting ideas from the literature, results from your research. The only objective is **not to lose it**. It is important that it be **complete** and **retrievable** when you need it. When you write for this purpose, do not spend too much time on phrasing your text creatively. After all, at this point it is often difficult to estimate what the text should look like in the end. Chances are considerable that you will need to scrap much of it eventually or make changes and additions to these draft chapters. Then it would be a waste of all the time spent on formulating and finishing. That is not an efficient way to go about it.
- 3 Sometimes you are not writing for someone else but only for yourself. An example would be when you want to demonstrate **how far you have come**: are you getting the story on paper yet or what could the structure look like? If that is your goal, all you need to do is write a very rough version. If you spend time on elaborate wording or a fancy layout in that situation, you would need a very long time to figure out how far you have come with your story. You may discover that you still have some research to do. Your beautifully phrased story might have to be scrapped. If you write with this goal in mind, the most important thing is that you do it **fast** (see chapter 9).

1.3 Writing strategies; more or less effective

Below are some characteristics of writing processes as they appeared in several studies done by Flower & Hayes in the late 1970s in the USA.

'Poor' writer

- Starting point: the information collected
what you know
- The writer tells what he knows about the subject
writer-based
- Text is a collection of facts and ideas
knowledge telling
- The writer selects some topics and for each topic writes what he knows about it
knowledge telling strategy
- The writer works linearly from content to text
What do I want to say?
↓ *content space*
How am I going to write this down?
↓ *rhetorical space*
- If the writer reflects upon his writing, he uses the same words he used for writing
thinking of
- The writer works sentence by sentence; text structure is 'growing' along with the sentences
local planning
- The writer predominantly pays attention to formulating what he wants to say
writing
- The writer pays attention to words and sentences
surface level

'Good' writer

- Starting point: the goal of the information collected
what you want to do with what you know
- The writer tells what the reader wants to know about the subject
reader-based
- Text is the answer to a question
knowledge transforming/problem solving
- The writer evaluates and integrates the information
reflective strategy
- The writer works cyclically from content to text and from text back to content
What do I want to say?
↓ *content space*
How am I going to write this down?
↓ *rhetorical space*
Is what I have written really what I wanted to tell?
↓↑ *content space*
- If the writer reflects upon his writing, he is able to think and talk 'freely' about his writing, using different words than he used in the text
thinking about
- The structure of the text is designed before writing takes place
global planning
- The writer predominantly pays attention to preparing his writing and reflecting on what he has written
prewriting and rewriting
- The writer pays attention to the goal and the meaning of the writing
deep level

1.4 Tips to take on the challenges

The tips to navigate these pitfalls are straightforward:

- 1 divide the work into steps (phases and sub-activities);
- 2 formulate the goal of each of those steps;
- 3 pause regularly to check whether you are still working towards realizing your goals (reflecting).

In this book, you will find step-by-step procedures for the different sub-activities. In each part, the procedures will guide you towards an effective approach. We are talking about the following sub-activities that are part of the academic writing process:

1 Getting an overview of the task

This encompasses:

- a The procedure: how are things organized? Think of deadlines, consultations, co-authorship, division of tasks, et cetera.
- b The process: what are you supposed to do? For example using specific methods, literature, writing several drafts, et cetera.
- c The product: what should the text look like? You could think of length, content, structure, style, et cetera.

2 Picturing the research; designing a research plan

This means 'circling around' the research problem:

- a formulating the main research question;
- b positioning the subject within the discipline(s) (= disciplinary embedding);
- c formulating the reasons for that question (= relevance);
- d describing the sub-questions and methods (= researchability);
- e formulating the exact domain and variables involved in the answer(s) (= precision).

3 Carrying out the research

This encompasses:

- a collecting data (answers to your sub-questions);
- b recording the data;
- c analysing the data;
- d drawing conclusions.

4 Producing and rewriting the text

This encompasses:

- a identifying content, structure, and length (writing a 'bin version');
- b making an outline: a list that shows the main ideas and the structure of something that you are planning to write (Macmillan English Dictionary);

- c writing the first draft;
- d rewriting:
 - 1 evaluation and revision of content and structure;
 - 2 evaluation and revision of style and language;
 - 3 more evaluation and revision;
 - 4 more evaluation and revision;
 - 5 more ...
- e final editing: adding the finishing touches (spelling, references, layout, et cetera).

1.5 Misconceptions to dispel

The message in the previous sections was, 'Don't do too much at the same time. Instead divide the work into sub-activities and carry them out with a sense of purpose'. This chapter about the writing process ends with a few common misconceptions that many writers struggle with.

1 Writing is a talent and I just don't have it

This is not true: writing is a **skill** you can develop. Practice makes perfect, especially in the case of writing. If you have little experience, it may take awhile before you have mastered all the sub-skills, but each writing task is another opportunity to further develop your writing skills. Develop your own perfect strategy by:

- a trying out new strategies;
- b stating clear goals at every stage;
- c reflecting on what you are doing;
- d adjusting a strategy if it does not work.

2 I can skip the tasks I don't like (for example: making an outline, revising the text)

This is not true. Planning, writing, and revision activities have to be done in one way or another and at set moments in the process. Sub-activities may be performed at various stages. That is partly a matter of personal preference. Do bear in mind you will need to make time for everything at some point, for example:

- a if you don't plan in advance, you will have to think about your content and structure later (and make sure there is time for that ...);
- b if you don't analyse your data before writing, you will have to do it later;
- c at some point you really will have to start writing ...

3 Writing is an individual, lonely process, so I need to do it all by myself

This is not true. Academic writing is about research, and doing research is building collectively on a body of knowledge. Additionally, academic writing