

A FRAMEWORK FOR COURSE DESIGN IN ACADEMIC WRITING FOR TERTIARY EDUCATION

H.G. Butler

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

D.Phil. Linguistics

In the Unit for Academic Literacy,

Faculty of Humanities

University of Pretoria

Supervisor: Prof. A.J. Weideman

Pretoria

December 2006

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to:

- Prof. Albert Weideman, my supervisor, to whom I am especially indebted for his sustained encouragement, his guidance and insights in seeing the bigger picture, as well as his relentless attention to detail.
- My wife, Anneke, for her love and unconditional support, not only emotionally, but also in discussions about ideas and her keen eye for inconsistencies.
- My parents for their unwavering encouragement and support.
- Friends and colleagues who supported me for the duration of this study and, most importantly, acted as a soundboard for my ideas.
- Jacqui Somerville, my statistical consultant, for her assistance with the statistical analyses of the data.
- All the research subjects of this study, who were prepared to sacrifice time and effort to participate in this study.
- God Almighty, for giving me courage.

Abstract

Academic writing is generally regarded as the most important communication medium through which people in the tertiary academic context choose to communicate their ideas. It is also well known that it is sometimes an arduous process for students to become accustomed to the requirements (the conventions and conditions) that hold for the production of appropriate written texts in this context. The initial impetus for the current study was provided by what appeared to be a significant problem that some supervisors at the University of Pretoria identified in terms of the academic writing ability of their postgraduate students.

This study therefore investigates postgraduate academic writing with regard to a number of such issues, and does so within the broader confines of academic literacy. The ultimate purpose of this investigation is to discover how writing interventions may be designed that offer appropriate assistance to students who experience difficulty with their writing.

The study commences with an attempt to find support for treating 'academic discourse' as a potentially productive area of academic enquiry. It therefore presents an account on the nature of a 'discourse community', and attempts to ascertain whether there are any grounds on which 'academic discourse' may be regarded as a unique type of discourse used for specific communicative functions in the tertiary academic environment. It further discusses critically some of the traditional features of academic texts.

The research then proposes thirteen design principles that serve as injunctions that should be considered in the development of writing courses, and proceeds to a critical discussion of the most important approaches in the teaching and learning of writing. What is evident from this discussion is that none of the historical approaches will, on their own, enable one to design justifiable writing courses. As a result, an eclectic approach is required in order to integrate the strengths of these approaches into a strategy for writing course design that is theoretically and practically justifiable.

Subsequently, the critical interpretation of the literature in the first part of the study is used in the design of a framework for writing course design in tertiary education. This framework consists of six focuses that stand in a relationship of dynamic interaction towards a description of the context in which tertiary students write. Thus, relevant aspects concerning the writer, text, reader, institutional context and one's approach to writing are all essential elements that should be carefully considered in terms of their potential influence on the eventual design of materials that will constitute a writing course.

The rest of the study consists of an application of the proposed framework that addresses firstly, the perceptions of supervisors at the University about the academic literacy ability of their postgraduate students, as well as their requirements for academic writing. It then proceeds to an investigation of a specific group of students' (from the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences) perceptions about their own academic literacy ability and a determination of their perceptions and expectations of academic writing at university. Because the information that was collected (by means of questionnaires) in both cases mentioned above is mainly perceptual in nature, it was considered essential to determine the academic literacy ability of students in the study group by means of a reliable testing instrument. A written text that these same students produced was further analysed in order to establish possible writing difficulties they experienced. In addition, it was important to confirm certain findings from the supervisor questionnaire, and more specific information had to be collected on particular writing issues that could inform discipline specific writing course design (this was accomplished through focus group interviews with supervisors of the School of Agricultural and Food Sciences).

A combination of all the prominent findings of the empirical work mentioned above, as well as insights gained in the literature survey, is then used to make justifiable suggestions for the design of writing course materials for students in the study group.

Finally, a number of issues were identified that could not be addressed by this study and, therefore, suggestions are made for future research that may investigate these matters.

Key words: academic discourse; academic literacy; academic English; academic writing; postgraduate writing; tertiary education; language support; language planning; ESL teaching and learning; ESP/EAP; didactics; methodology; writing approach; writing course design.

Opsomming

Oor die algemeen word akademiese skryfwerk beskou as die belangrikste vorm van kommunikasie wat akademici in 'n tersiêre konteks gebruik om hul idees mee te kommunikeer. Dit is verder 'n bekende verskynsel dat dit somtyds vir studente 'n moeisame proses is om gewoon te raak aan die vereistes (die konvensies en kondisies) wat geld vir die skryf van aanvaarbare geskrewe tekste in hierdie konteks. 'n Beduidende probleem wat sommige studieleiers aan die Universiteit van Pretoria geïdentifiseer het in terme van die akademiese skryfvaardigheid van hulle nagraadse studente, het die aanvanklike stimulus vir hierdie studie gebied.

Gevolgtrek is hierdie studie nagraadse skryfvaardigheid in terme van 'n aantal belangrike skryfkwessies binne die meer omvattende konteks van akademiese geleerdheid. Die uiteindelige doel van die ondersoek is om te bepaal op watter wyse skryfintervensies ontwerp kan word wat gepaste ondersteuning kan bied aan studente wat sukkel met akademiese skryfwerk.

Die studie begin deur die begrip "akademiese diskoers" as 'n potensieel-produktiewe area van akademiese ondersoek te regverdig. Die aard van 'n "diskoersgemeenskap" word omskryf en daar word bepaal of daar enige grondslag is waarop "akademiese diskoers" beskou kan word as 'n unieke diskoers wat vir spesifieke kommunikatiewe funksies binne die tersiêre akademiese konteks gebruik word. Van die tradisionele kenmerke van akademiese tekste word ook krities bespreek.

Die studie stel verder dertien riglyne voor wat oorweeg moet word in die ontwerp van 'n skryfkursus. Dit word gevolg deur 'n kritiese bespreking van die belangrikste benaderings in die onderrig en leer van skryfvaardigheid. Wat duidelik blyk uit hierdie bespreking, is dat nie een van die historiese benaderings op sigself sal lei tot regverdigbare skryfkursusontwerp nie. Gevolgtrek is 'n meer eklektiese benadering nodig wat die relevante aspekte van verskillende benaderings integreer in 'n strategie vir kursusontwerp wat teoreties en prakties regverdigbaar is.

Die kritiese interpretasie van die literatuur in die eerste deel van die studie word daarna gebruik in die ontwerp van 'n raamwerk vir skryfkursusontwikkeling in tersiêre onderrig. Hierdie raamwerk bestaan uit ses fokusareas wat in 'n verhouding van dinamiese interaksie staan ten opsigte van 'n beskrywing van die tersiêre konteks waarbinne studente skryf. Belangrike aspekte rakende die skrywer, teks, leser, institusionele konteks sowel as 'n skryfbenadering, is dus essensiële aspekte wat deeglik oorweeg moet word met betrekking tot hul potensiële invloed op die uiteindelijke ontwerp van materiaal vir 'n skryfkursus.

Die res van die studie bestaan uit 'n toepassing van die voorgestelde raamwerk. Eerstens word studieleiers aan die Universiteit se persepsies oor die akademiese geletterdheidsvermoë van hulle nagraadse studente, sowel as die vereistes wat hulle stel vir akademiese skryfwerk, aangespreek. Vervolgens ondersoek die studie die persepsies van 'n spesifieke groep nagraadse studente (van die Fakulteit Natuur- en Landbouwetenskappe) oor hul eie akademiese geletterdheidsvermoë en daar word ook bepaal wat hul persepsies en verwagtinge is rakende akademiese skryfwerk op universiteitsvlak. Omdat die inligting (wat deur vraelyste versamel is) in beide hierdie gevalle perseptueel van aard is, is dit belangrik geag dat die studente se akademiese geletterdheidsvermoë deur 'n betroubare meetinstrument bepaal word. Daar is ook van dieselfde groep studente verwag om 'n geskrewe teks te produseer wat vervolgens geanaliseer is om moontlike probleemareas in die studente se skryfwerk te identifiseer. Dit was verder ook belangrik om sekere bevindinge uit die studieleiervraelyste te bevestig. Meer volledige inligting oor sekere skryfkewessies moes ook ingesamel word om sodoende die ontwikkeling van skryfkursusse vir spesifieke dissiplines te ondersteun (dit is bereik deur van fokusgroeponderhoude met studieleiers van die Skool vir Landbou- en Voedselwetenskappe gebruik te maak).

'n Kombinasie van al die prominente bevindinge uit die empiriese werk hierbo genoem, tesame met die insigte uit die literatuuroorsig, is gebruik om regverdigbare voorstelle te maak vir die ontwerp van skryfkursusmateriaal vir die studente in die studiegroep.

Ten slotte is 'n aantal kwessies geïdentifiseer wat nie deur hierdie studie aangespreek kon word nie en daarom word voorstelle vir verdere navorsing gemaak wat hierdie aangeleenthede kan ondersoek.

Sleuteltermes: akademiese diskoers; akademiese geletterdheid; akademiese Engels; akademiese skryfwerk; nagraadse skryfwerk; tersiêre onderrig; taalondersteuning; taalbeplanning; onderrig en leer van Engels Tweede Taal; Engels vir spesifieke doeleindes; Engels vir akademiese doeleindes; didaktiek; metodologie; skryfbenadering; skryfkursusontwikkeling.

Table of contents

Chapter 1	Contextualisation of the problem	1
1.1	Introduction	1
1.2	The importance of English as academic language	1
1.3	The context of higher education in South Africa	2
1.3.1	A changing tertiary environment	2
1.3.2	Tertiary academic literacy in context	3
1.3.3	The language of learning (LOL)	5
1.3.4	Academic literacy development at the University of Pretoria	7
1.4	Problem statement	9
1.5	Aims of the study	11
1.6	Method of research	12
1.7	Chapter division	13
1.8	Conclusion	16
Chapter 2	Academic discourse in tertiary education	17
2.1	Introduction	17
2.2	The nature of academic discourse	21
2.3	Reasoning in a tertiary academic context	28
2.4	Textual conventions of academic discourse	33
2.4.1	Formality	34
2.4.2	Conciseness and exactness	35
2.4.3	Impersonality and objectivity	35
2.4.4	Nominalization	36
2.4.5	Grammatical correctness	37
2.4.6	Coherent and cohesive (logical) structure and argument	38
2.4.7	Appropriate use of evidence	39
2.5	Conclusion	40
Chapter 3	The teaching and learning of academic writing	41
3.1	Introduction	41
3.2	Key issues in the teaching and learning of academic writing	42
3.2.1	Include an accurate determination of students' current levels of academic literacy	42
3.2.2	Include an accurate account of the understandings and requirements of lectures/supervisors in specific departments or faculties regarding academic writing	43
3.2.3	Engage students' prior knowledge and abilities in different literacies to connect with academic literacy in a productive way	44
3.2.4	Consider learners' needs (and wants) as a central issue in academic writing	44
3.2.5	Create a learning environment where students feel safe to explore and find their own voices in the academic context	45

3.2.6	Give careful consideration to the most appropriate mode for teaching and learning academic writing	47
3.2.7	Determine whether primary and additional language users should be treated differently in writing interventions	48
3.2.8	Provide ample opportunity to develop revision and editing skills	49
3.2.9	Acknowledge assessment and feedback as central to course design	49
3.2.10	Provide relevant, contextualised opportunities for engaging in academic writing tasks that students feel contribute towards their development as academic writers in the tertiary context	53
3.2.11	Include productive strategies that achieve a focus on language form	54
3.2.12	Support and encourage the use of technology in writing	55
3.2.13	Focus on the interrelationship between different language abilities in the promotion of writing	55
3.3	Approaches in the development of writing	56
3.3.1	Product (text) approaches	58
3.3.2	Process approaches to writing	59
3.3.3	Writing as social practice	62
3.3.4	Hybrid approaches	65
3.4	Conclusion	70
Chapter 4	A framework for the design of tertiary level academic writing courses	71
4.1	Introduction	71
4.2	Elements of a framework for academic writing course design	74
4.2.1	The student as writer of academic texts	75
4.2.2	Textual features of academic writing	86
4.2.3	The reader of student texts	88
4.2.4	Institutional factors influencing the development of writing ability	91
4.2.5	Approach to teaching and learning writing	94
4.2.6	The development of writing course materials	99
4.3	Conclusion	103
Chapter 5	Academic literacy perceptions and requirements of supervisors – data analysis and discussion	105
5.1	Introduction	105
5.2	Academic writing requirements for postgraduate studies	106
5.2.1	Survey instrument	106
5.2.2	Analysis and interpretation of the results for all supervisors	108
5.2.2.1	Introduction	108
5.2.2.2	Section A – Institutional and professional issues	108
5.2.2.3	Section B – Supervisor perceptions about the academic literacy levels of their students	112
5.2.2.4	Section C – Specific literacy and writing difficulties experienced by postgraduate students	116
5.2.2.5	Section D – Academic writing requirements of disciplines	120
5.2.2.6	Section E – Supervisor feedback	123
5.2.2.7	Section F – Academic literacy support	124

5.2.3	A discussion of the data pertaining to supervisors from the School of Agricultural and Food Sciences compared to supervisors from other faculties	126
5.3	Conclusion	131
Chapter 6	Student perceptions and expectations of academic literacy and writing – data analysis and discussion	133
6.1	Introduction	133
6.2	Survey instrument	134
6.3	Analysis and interpretation of the results	134
6.3.1	Section A – Institutional and professional issues	134
6.3.2	Section B – Language background	135
6.3.3	Section C – Student perceptions about their own level of academic literacy as well as the literacy demands of their courses	137
6.3.4	Section D – Personal writing needs	143
6.3.5	Section E – Specific information on postgraduate studies	144
6.4	Conclusion	149
Chapter 7	Results for the Test of Academic Literacy Levels and written text analysis	150
7.1	Introduction	150
7.2	The Test of Academic Literacy Levels	150
7.2.1	Test description	151
7.2.2	Discussion of the results	154
7.3	Analysis of a written text produced by the study group	158
7.3.1	A description of the writing task	158
7.3.2	Error categorisation	159
7.3.3	Analysis and discussion of the results	161
7.3.3.1	Category 1 – Grammar	161
7.3.3.2	Category 2 – Academic discourse	168
7.3.3.3	Category 3 – Presentation	173
7.4	Conclusion	175
Chapter 8	Interview data on academic literacy and writing – analysis and discussion	176
8.1	Introduction	176
8.2	Analysis of the data	177
8.2.1	Students' language preference for academic writing	177
8.2.2	Distinguishing between primary and additional language users in terms of academic literacy ability	178
8.2.3	The mismatch between supervisor and student perceptions regarding students' functional literacy abilities	178
8.2.4	The consequences of inadequate academic literacy levels on student achievement	179
8.2.5	The reliability of traditional strategies for screening prospective students	180

8.2.6	Are students' literacy problems restricted to writing only?	182
8.2.7	Specific literacy difficulties of postgraduate students	182
8.2.8	Generic written genres used in the different departments	185
8.2.9	Acceptability of different types of evidence	187
8.2.10	Referencing systems	187
8.2.11	Supervisor feedback on student writing	188
8.2.12	The prominence of language correctness in the assessment of written texts	191
8.2.13	Strategies for ensuring the final language correctness of student texts	192
8.3	Conclusion	193
Chapter 9	Implications of the empirical results for the design of an academic writing course for the study group	195
9.1	Introduction	195
9.2	Major implications for writing course design	196
9.2.1	Supervisor perceptions and disciplinary requirements	196
9.2.2	Student perceptions and literacy difficulties	207
9.3	Conclusion	216
Chapter 10	A proposal for the development of academic writing course materials for the study group	218
10.1	Introduction	218
10.2	General aims, critical cross-field outcomes and specific outcomes for the course	223
10.2.1	General aims	224
10.2.2	Critical cross-field outcomes	225
10.2.3	Specific outcomes	225
10.3	Writing tasks and materials	226
10.3.1	Support students to become more aware of their personal needs with regard to academic literacy (and writing)	226
10.3.2	Make use of writing tasks that would guide students to discover the writing requirements of the specific discipline	228
10.3.2.1	Investigate the specific writing requirements of the discipline	228
10.3.2.2	Make use of generic written genres in the School	235
10.3.2.3	Strengthen student awareness about different types of evidence that are acceptable in their disciplines	239
10.3.2.4	Address prominent stylistic conventions of academic discourse for the School	240
10.3.3	Provide opportunities for (or guidance as to what resources may be used in) the development of basic proficiency in English	241
10.3.4	Introduce students to academic writing as an integral part of academic literacy ability	243
10.3.4.1	Introduce students to writing as a process	243
10.3.4.2	Use writing as a device to organise ideas	246

10.3.4.3	Build students' confidence in their ability to write acceptable academic texts	246
10.3.4.4	Assist students in their interpretation of feedback on their writing	247
10.3.4.5	Introduce strategies that would minimise the language errors in student texts	248
10.3.4.6	The construction of authoritative academic arguments	249
10.3.4.7	Use the Harvard method as foundation for the principles of referencing	251
10.3.4.8	Address the nature of plagiarism	252
10.3.4.9	Make productive use of connecting devices	252
10.4	Conclusion	253
Chapter 11	Conclusion and recommendations	254
11.1	Introduction	254
11.2	Limitations and recommendations for further research	255
11.3	Conclusion	258
	References	259
	Addendums	267
Addendum A	Questionnaire – Supervisor perceptions of the academic literacy requirements of postgraduate students regarding the production of written academic texts	267
Addendum B	Questionnaire – background in academic literacy (student profile)	282
Addendum C	Questions for the follow up supervisor interview on academic literacy and writing	294
Addendum D	Writing check	297
Addendum E	Error correction scheme for language and style	298
Addendum F	Additional examples of writing tasks	299
Addendum G	Recordings of the supervisor interviews on compact disc	316

List of figures and tables

Figure 2.1	The cognitive process	30
Figure 3.1	The writing process	61
Figure 3.2	The relationship between process and product in writing	68
Figure 4.1	Key elements of a framework for academic writing course design in tertiary education	73
Figure 4.2	Elements of text structure	82
Figure 5.1	Postgraduate students' language preference and use according to supervisors	110
Figure 5.2	Primary language use of postgraduate students at the UP for 2006	111
Figure 5.3	Language preference of postgraduate students at the UP for 2006	111
Figure 5.4	Supervisor perceptions of their students' general academic literacy ability	114
Figure 5.5	Supervisor perceptions about the academic literacy difficulties of postgraduate students	117
Figure 5.6	Supervisor perceptions on the writing ability of postgraduate students	120
Figure 6.1	Student perceptions of their own academic literacy abilities	137
Figure 7.1	Percentage of 'at risk' students clustered according to TALL test scores	155
Figure 7.2	Postgraduate students' TALL scores divided into achievement on the different test sections	156
Figure 7.3	Average scores for different functional test items in Section 5	157
Figure 10.1	Task 1 – Supervisor requirements of academic writing	232
Figure 10.2	Task 2 – A survey of the literature	236
Figure 10.3	Task 3 – The research proposal	238
Table 4.1	Important considerations regarding student writers	85
Table 4.2	Textual features of academic writing	88
Table 4.3	Readers of student writing	91
Table 4.4	Institutional demands and constraints	94
Table 4.5	An approach to writing development	98
Table 4.6	Materials development	103
Table 5.1	Supervisor perceptions on the importance of specific written genres	121
Table 5.2	Supervisor perceptions on the importance of text types	122
Table 5.3	Important findings regarding supervisor perceptions and requirements of academic literacy and writing	125
Table 6.1	Student perceptions on the most important issues in the production of quality academic writing	141
Table 6.2	Prominent findings of the postgraduate student survey on academic literacy and writing	148
Table 7.1	Category 1 – Grammar	160
Table 7.2	Category 2 – Academic discourse	160
Table 7.3	Category 3 – Presentation	161