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 tersiëre konteks gebruik om hul idees mee te kommunikeer. Dit is verder 'n bekende verskynsel dat dit somtyds vir studente 'n moeisame proses is om gewoond 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 anvanklike stimulus vir hierdie studie gebied.

Gevolglik ondersoek hierdie studie nagraadse skryfvaardigheid in terme van 'n aantal belangrike skryfkwessies binne die meer omvattende konteks van akademiese geletterdheid. Die uiteindelike 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 onderzoek 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 tersiëre 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. Gevolglik 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 tersiëre onderrig. Hierdie raamwerk bestaan uit ses fokusareas wat in 'n verhouding van dinamiese interaksie staan ten opsigte van 'n beskrywing van die tersiër konteks waarbinne studente skryf. Belangrike aspekte rakende die skrywer, teks, leser, institusionele konteks sowel as 'n skryfb enadering, is dus essensiële aspekte wat deeglik oorweeg moet word met betrekking tot hul potensiële invloed op die uiteindelike 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 perceptueel 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 geanalyseer 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 skryfkwessies moes ook ingesamel word om sodoende die ontwikkeling van skryfkursusse vir spesifieke dissiplines te ondersteun (dit is bereik deur van fokusgroeperonderhoude 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.

**Sleutel terme:** akademiese diskoers; akademiese geletterdheid; akademiese Engels; akademiese skryfwerk; nagraadse skryfwerk; tersiëre 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 Introduction  
1.2 The importance of English as academic language  
1.3 The context of higher education in South Africa  
1.3.1 A changing tertiary environment  
1.3.2 Tertiary academic literacy in context  
1.3.3 The language of learning (LOL)  
1.3.4 Academic literacy development at the University of Pretoria  
1.4 Problem statement  
1.5 Aims of the study  
1.6 Method of research  
1.7 Chapter division  
1.8 Conclusion

## Chapter 2  Academic discourse in tertiary education

2.1 Introduction  
2.2 The nature of academic discourse  
2.3 Reasoning in a tertiary academic context  
2.4 Textual conventions of academic discourse  
2.4.1 Formality  
2.4.2 Conciseness and exactness  
2.4.3 Impersonality and objectivity  
2.4.4 Nominalization  
2.4.5 Grammatical correctness  
2.4.6 Coherent and cohesive (logical) structure and argument  
2.4.7 Appropriate use of evidence  
2.5 Conclusion

## Chapter 3  The teaching and learning of academic writing

3.1 Introduction  
3.2 Key issues in the teaching and learning of academic writing  
3.2.1 Include an accurate determination of students' current levels of academic literacy  
3.2.2 Include an accurate account of the understandings and requirements of lectures/supervisors in specific departments or faculties regarding academic writing  
3.2.3 Engage students' prior knowledge and abilities in different literacies to connect with academic literacy in a productive way  
3.2.4 Consider learners' needs (and wants) as a central issue in academic writing  
3.2.5 Create a learning environment where students feel safe to explore and find their own voices in the academic context
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.2.6</td>
<td>Give careful consideration to the most appropriate mode for teaching and learning academic writing</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.7</td>
<td>Determine whether primary and additional language users should be treated differently in writing interventions</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.8</td>
<td>Provide ample opportunity to develop revision and editing skills</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.9</td>
<td>Acknowledge assessment and feedback as central to course design</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.10</td>
<td>Provide relevant, contextualised opportunities for engaging in academic writing tasks that students feel contribute towards their development as academic writers in the tertiary context</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.11</td>
<td>Include productive strategies that achieve a focus on language form</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.12</td>
<td>Support and encourage the use of technology in writing</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.13</td>
<td>Focus on the interrelationship between different language abilities in the promotion of writing</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Approaches in the development of writing</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.1</td>
<td>Product (text) approaches</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.2</td>
<td>Process approaches to writing</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.3</td>
<td>Writing as social practice</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.4</td>
<td>Hybrid approaches</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chapter 4

**A framework for the design of tertiary level academic writing courses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Elements of a framework for academic writing course design</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1</td>
<td>The student as writer of academic texts</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2</td>
<td>Textual features of academic writing</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.3</td>
<td>The reader of student texts</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.4</td>
<td>Institutional factors influencing the development of writing ability</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.5</td>
<td>Approach to teaching and learning writing</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.6</td>
<td>The development of writing course materials</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chapter 5

**Academic literacy perceptions and requirements of supervisors – data analysis and discussion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Academic writing requirements for postgraduate studies</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1</td>
<td>Survey instrument</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2</td>
<td>Analysis and interpretation of the results for all supervisors</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2.2</td>
<td>Section A – Institutional and professional issues</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2.3</td>
<td>Section B – Supervisor perceptions about the academic literacy levels of their students</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2.4</td>
<td>Section C – Specific literacy and writing difficulties experienced by postgraduate students</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2.5</td>
<td>Section D – Academic writing requirements of disciplines</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2.6</td>
<td>Section E – Supervisor feedback</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2.7</td>
<td>Section F – Academic literacy support</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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