CHAPTER 3   The teaching and learning of academic writing

3.1   Introduction

This chapter discusses key issues and principles that are to inform the design and facilitation of academic writing interventions. As we have noted from the previous chapter, these issues will necessarily include those that inculcate in students a dynamic awareness of academic discourse norms and the necessary level of academic literacy to adapt their own use of language for different contexts in the tertiary academic environment.

According to Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis, and Swann (2003:12), there are three crucial issues that should be investigated in the teaching and learning of writing in higher education. They believe that lecturers teaching academic writing should:

a)   identify the kinds of language use with which students need to become familiar in order to write successfully in higher education (cf. Chapter 2);

b)   make these uses available to students in ways which enhance their learning and motivation for writing and participating in higher education; and

c)   find ways of building on students' existing knowledge of and uses of language.

Because these issues emphasise the context of writing in higher education, they may be used as a structuring guideline for the ensuing discussion of important issues in the teaching and learning of academic writing. The first issue above addresses the type of discourse to be produced within a tertiary context. The second issue emphasises the learning process and environment and the third, the learner and what he/she brings to the learning context. The following discussion addresses the needs of the learner first and subsequently focuses on textual and contextual requirements for academic writing. However, as we will note below, at times it is necessary to combine features from different focal points as a result of their interrelated nature.

3.2   Key issues in the teaching and learning of academic writing

The following section deals with a number of crucial considerations in the design and facilitation of writing interventions. These issues are articulated below in the form of injunctions – requirements or conditions if you wish – which function as principles for writing course design. This articulation therefore places this study squarely within the field of applied linguistics as defined by Weideman (2007), i.e. as a field which brings various defensible principles to bear upon the design of a solution to a particular language problem. By this measure, such interventions should typically:

3.2.1   Include an accurate determination of students' current levels of academic literacy

Any intervention that aims to develop students' abilities in academic writing should have access to ways of determining students' levels of ability in regard to academic literacy and writing.

A discrete item testing instrument might yield useful information about overall academic literacy. It may, for instance, indicate the student's competence in making a text coherent, or recognising different types of text, or assess how well the student reads graphs and diagrammatic representations of information, or express whether the student can distinguish between essential and non-essential information, or has the ability to know what counts as evidence, recognise ambiguity, classify, categorise and compare, has the level of required academic vocabulary, and so forth (cf. Weideman, 2003c; Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004a; Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004b; Weideman, 2006a). All of these are competencies that are useful also to writing, or at least are pre-supposed and taken for granted before one ventures into academic writing. This kind of assessment has the advantage of indeed measuring academic literacy reliably (cf. statistics on the reliability of 7 different versions of TALL [average $\alpha = 0.93$] in Weideman, 2006a). It might, however, not be the most useful or only measure of the specific ability to write.

The act of writing a longer academic text involves a synthesis of everything that students can possibly access in terms of knowledge and information processing and

production strategies with regard to academic discourse, and the context in which it is performed. All these different abilities interact in complex ways when students are asked to produce a longer, essay-type piece of writing. Most probably, the best way to determine whether students can produce an appropriate and coherent longer type text is to let them do just that, viz. produce such a text. By doing this one can also establish what strategies they use in the production of such a text, by, for example, allowing them ample time to revise their text in any manner they wish in response to feedback. The first copy and the revised copy could then give one a very good idea of students' levels of academic writing ability, as well as their writing behaviours regarding the construction of texts. Though perhaps not as reliable in terms of empirical analyses as an objectively-scored instrument, this is the kind of assessment instrument that intuitively is more credible and appealing.

It is, moreover, not only important for writing educators to be aware of students' levels of writing ability, but also what levels of such ability are required at specific stages in a student's studies.

3.2.2 Include an accurate account of the understandings and requirements of lecturers/supervisors in specific departments or faculties regarding academic writing

The planning and design of academic writing interventions should determine what exactly are understood to be both surface features (such as style) as well as underlying rhetorical characteristics of academic discourse in the disciplinary context concerned. According to Johns (1990), the reader of texts contributes to its coherence with what he/she brings to the reading context. She notes that according to English second language (ESL) reading literature: "Coherence is … established through the fit between the schemata of the reader (audience) and the organisation, content, and argument of the text" (Johns, 1990:30). If one accepts this argument, it follows that a crucial part of any course on academic writing should be working towards a match between the texts that students produce and what their lecturers/supervisors expect from such texts (i.e. how they will read them). Investigating what lecturers expect in this regard therefore stands central to such an endeavour. Such an investigation evidently includes a thorough determination of the stylistic/textual conventions that

are valued in specific disciplines, and productive ways of raising student awareness and command of such conventions.

3.2.3 Engage students' prior knowledge and abilities in different literacies to connect with academic literacy in a productive way

Students do not arrive at the university as empty vessels. All students have been exposed to some literacy context for an extended period of time. It often happens, however, that the differences between literacies practised in other cultural and social contexts and tertiary academic literacy are so significant that students find it difficult to cope with academic literacy at a tertiary level. It is now generally agreed (cf. Gee, 1998) that interventions that focus on academic discourse should utilise other literacies by building scaffolding into courses, in order to lead students from their own literacies to tertiary academic literacy (cf. also Nunan, 1991). Thesen (1998), for example, reports on the design and use of English for academic purposes (EAP) materials at the University of the Western Cape. A central principle in these materials is the importance of validating "other literacy practices with which students may have come into contact" (Thesen, 1998:46). Materials that foreground a comparison between different registers and genres, for example, give students the opportunity to use their prior knowledge as a framework with which to approach tertiary academic literacy.

3.2.4 Consider learners' needs (and wants) as a central issue in academic writing

Although students might not yet be aware of their specific academic writing needs, it is very important that they get the opportunity to share what they think their needs might be (wants). This will help course designers/writing instructors determine what students give priority to when they think about academic writing. It might therefore be possible to make productive use of ideas generated by students in group/individual discussions about academic discourse and academic writing in both the design and implementation of writing courses.

The amount and type of support or 'scaffolding' offered to students will depend, to a large extent, on their specific needs. Coffin *et al.* (2003:12) note that: "For successful

scaffolding to take place, lecturers need to know where the student is starting from and aiming for in the process of learning."

3.2.5 Create a learning environment where students feel safe to explore and find their own voices in the academic context

As has already been noted, students new to the tertiary academic environment often find its conventions and culture alien to what they know and are used to. Lecturers and textbooks are often placed on a pedestal, as if these are not to be touched by critical inquiry. What one finds in a textbook and what the lecturer says are mostly seen as the truth and therefore not to be questioned. In this context, tertiary institutions negate one of their most basic objectives, namely nurturing critical, individual problem solvers. Furthermore, students also sometimes admit to using the words of sources exactly as they find them because of the blind respect discussed above, as well as being scared that they would misrepresent what the source says (cf. also Leibowitz, 2005 on this topic).

Angelil-Carter (2000:157) suggests that what many educators often see as plagiarism is most probably part of the process of development for beginning writers trying to find their feet (or own voice) in the academic world. Many such novice writers usually do not intentionally set out to deceive. According to her, while imitation is a crucial part of the learning process, an unbending perception of plagiarism 'criminalizes' imitation (also see discussion under section 2.4.7).

Plagiarism is, however, one of the scourges of the academy. One could define plagiarism as *ideas/words copied directly from some source without acknowledging that source, as a result of a person not wanting to make the effort (or not having the time due to bad planning) to engage fully with a problem in terms of working out its solution for him/herself.* It would make sense that students are gradually introduced to contexts in which they should increasingly make use of sources in order to substantiate what they say. A good starting point could be for beginning students to understand that: "academic writers often summarise and synthesise the work of others" and this might "help students overcome the idea that citing sources is tantamount to admitting that the work is not their own" (Coffin *et al.* 2003:27). As

Angelil-Carter (2000:168) points out: "Gaining authority in academic writing means learning how to use the voices of others to develop one's own."

Townsend (2000) further argues that one should not test students beyond their limits with regard to assignment/essay topics. If these are too difficult for students, one is actually setting them up for failure, because they will most probably plagiarise pieces of texts from sources in order to get the assignment done. It may further be extremely helpful for novice writers if one could provide some scaffolding as to how topics could be tackled.

The majority of new students who arrive at South African universities have most probably been exposed to learning situations in which they either wrote from personal experience, or they wrote assignments from a single source, usually either the subject textbook or a similarly significant text. Angelil-Carter (2000:165) notes that many students in the South African tertiary context have "had very little previous experience in writing from multiple sources." Regarding this issue, Makhubela (2000) emphasises the need for learners to develop their ability to access information from different sources for the purpose of solving problems with such information. She refers to this ability as 'information literacy'. Being 'information literate' implies that students need to know which types of sources they can consult for writing assignments. They should also be able to judge the relative value of specific types of sources with regard to their potential contribution in a tertiary environment. In addition, they need information seeking strategies that would enable them to find the most up to date information on any specific topic. This type of literacy surely holds serious implications for how learners situate themselves in the context of an information society that strives towards a culture of life-long learning. In other words, apart from the obvious problems they will experience in an environment that is characterised by a culture of seeking information, it is doubtful whether students who have difficulty in finding relevant information and who struggle to judge the contextual usefulness of information, will attempt to keep up to date with developments in their disciplines when they enter the world of work after completion of their studies.

3.2.6 Give careful consideration to the most appropriate mode for teaching and learning academic writing

Due consideration must be given to the most productive approach in teaching academic writing to **groups** of students generally, but also more specifically, large groups of students. Tertiary institutions in South Africa are experiencing what is referred to as the 'massification' of higher education. This phenomenon is, however, not restricted to South Africa. Coffin *et al.* (2003:5) note that the massification of tertiary education is an international phenomenon. Therefore: "Many institutions have larger class sizes, fewer opportunities for small group teaching (such as seminars and tutorials) and – of specific relevance to student writing – little time for lecturers to comment on students' written work." It thus seems inevitable that tertiary institutions will have to cope with an ever-increasing number of students in classes, and will have to find creative ways of dealing with this issue, especially for literacy courses that are by nature supposed to be largely interactive.

In a general lecturing context with large groups of students, individual tutoring would be largely impractical when one considers the often limited resources available at tertiary institutions. In academic literacy classes, lecturers regularly have to deal with very large groups of students (e.g. 50-100 students on average in first year classes at the UP). There is, therefore, very little time in class to attend to the individual needs of students. Although lecturers can be consulted in their personal capacity, 2 hours of consultation time per week is not really adequate considering the number of students with difficulties, as well as the frequency and intensity of some of these problems. A tutor system where senior students can be consulted by individual novice writers – as is the current plan in the UP - does, however, hold potential for such writers receiving quality individualised input. But the quality depends largely on the quality of the tutors. The less experienced and the less able the tutors are, the more likely it is that quality will be compromised. In a postgraduate context, however, the specific problem of inadequate individualised attention found at undergraduate level is less severe, because writing instructors usually deal with smaller groups of students.

Individual tutoring is one of the more productive approaches in the improvement of student writing, since practical, individualised feedback can be provided to students

and misunderstandings and ambiguity clarified in a feedback-driven context. The operation of established writing centres at tertiary institutions across the world usually emphasises the importance of individual writing consultation. Students typically visit the writing centre either out of own choice or after having been referred to the centre by teaching staff. Such writing consultation also regularly includes writing centre staff working with departmental staff to address the specific writing needs of students from various disciplines. Although writing centres have proved to be one of the more productive approaches to writing development in recent times, it is also one of the more expensive options. In a context where it is expected of tertiary institutions to 'do more with less', the one-on-one consultative basis of writing support at writing centres may be considered an expensive luxury. However, if tertiary institutions can afford to establish a writing centre, such a concept may be productively integrated with that of separate writing courses offered to students in respect of offering additional, individualised assistance to such students. According to Moore, Paxton, Scott and Thesen (1998:15):

> The Writing Centre [at the University of Cape Town] was established as one of a range of educational interventions that would address the differing language needs of a diverse student body. It was thus seen as complementary to initiatives like EAP (and others yet to come), recognising that language difficulties (especially as they are apparent in student writing) are not the sole preserve of underprepared students, and that a variety of provisions is needed to cater for a variety of needs.

Importantly, a writing centre can provide academic writing support to those students who experience difficulty with specific aspects of academic writing but are not necessarily perceived to be 'at risk' with regard to their level of academic literacy. These students are typically not catered for by the formal curriculum at universities with respect to academic writing support.

3.2.7 Determine whether primary and additional language users should be treated differently in writing interventions

One should carefully consider whether there should be significant differences between academic writing courses designed for primary language users and those designed for additional language users, based on research findings on similarities and differences between these two groups of learners. Grabe and Kaplan (1996:1) state that: "There are … significant differences between the two groups of learners, since there are wide

variations in learner issues within each of these major groups." These researchers further suggest that although ample research evidence is available in native language research on writing, research on the writing of additional language users is in many respects not nearly adequate. Available research has shown (Van der Slik & Weideman, 2006) that first language users are quicker in acquiring academic discourse than additional language users, probably because of the additional advantage of a relatively sound foundation in the native language. Regarding group composition for instructional purposes, one should therefore investigate the feasibility of combining mother tongue and additional language users to be exposed to a writing intervention as one group of students. Obviously an issue such as the pace of a writing course may have implications for learning. Quicker learners may, therefore, become impatient and frustrated if the pace of the course is too slow. In such a context, quicker learners will have to be productively engaged in, for example, offering assistance to slower learners in group work sessions, thereby also reinforcing their own learning.

3.2.8 Provide ample opportunity to develop revision and editing skills

Research on writing practised as a process, as well as research on text construction (see Grabe & Kaplan, 1996), suggests that revision and editing as interconnected strategies stand central to the development of students' writing ability in a tertiary context. Student writers need to develop the ability to think critically about the texts they are writing with regard to its overall structure, development of argument and the appropriateness of the language and style used for the academic context. They should also be able to distance themselves from their own texts and be able to judge whether they have used sources appropriately and in a balanced way. Much of this ability will, however, relate to what knowledge students have about language in general, and academic discourse in particular.

3.2.9 Acknowledge assessment and feedback as central to course design

Assessment types and practices in writing courses have central implications for teaching methodology as well as course content. When one considers that summative assessment usually takes place near or at the end of a course, developmental types of

assessment during a course (formative assessment) have a pivotal role in preparing students for summative assessment opportunities. The main purpose of formative assessment in the writing context is therefore that it is used as a teaching instrument "to help students improve their work rather than measure their achievements" (Coffin *et al*. 2003:76).

According to Starfield (2000), it often happens that the assessment of writing is relegated to an afterthought once the bulk of a course has been designed. She notes that: "Assessment should be conceived of as an integral part of course design and development and not 'bolted-on' at the end" (Starfield, 2000:103). She further notes that 'front-loading' assessment – or awarding time and effort at the outset, reflecting on and specifying the criteria which will be used to assess the students and the outcomes one would like, and by communicating these clearly to students – could go far in addressing the gap that often exists between what and how something is taught in courses and how this is assessed.

Another concept that impacts on assessment is that of the immediacy of writing. It would be unfair to expect of low ability academic writers to produce written texts of similar quality in contexts that allow little time for revision. If one considers, for example, the ample additional time usually available for revision and editing in essay-type writing tasks, one cannot really compare a text produced in such a context to a more immediate type text produced in the context of examination or test writing. Where deadlines are specified in minutes, and not in days or weeks, the urgency of completion necessarily impacts on the quality of the finished product.

The importance of a careful consideration of exactly what is to be the focus of assessment opportunities where academic writing is expected of students is highlighted by the research of Van der Riet, Dyson and Quinn (1998). These authors suggest that because second-year students in Psychology at Rhodes University are not exposed to 'appropriate' writing assignments, their metacognitive and epistemic thinking abilities are not being adequately developed. This 'appropriateness' of writing assignments relates very strongly to decisions made beforehand about what strategies and knowledge are to be developed (and assessed) in students, and then setting assignments according to such information. It follows that closer contact

between writing course developers/consultants and departmental staff can lead to productive collaboration regarding the writing done for specific disciplines.

Apart from lecturer assessment, other types of assessment such as peer and self-assessment have a crucial role in the writing classroom. The main purpose of processes of peer and self-assessment in student writing is to

> expose students to situations in which through 'applying, purposefully, criteria of worth that they need to develop in their own work' to the work of others, they begin to internalise these criteria and apply them in their own work. Furthermore, students begin to appreciate the complex process of drafting and redrafting which underlies successful writing (Starfield, 2000:113).

The aim of self-assessment as a crucial skill for any student in higher education is to "develop learners who are able to accurately evaluate their own performance, reflect on areas of strength and weakness and where improvement is needed, so that over time students take greater degrees of responsibility for their learning, and can transfer these skills to a work environment" (Starfield, 2000:114). Even more so, self-assessment is central to the postgraduate endeavour where students' texts are in a constant process of revision until the final draft is presented for formal assessment.

Assessment practices should be transparent to the point of enabling students to work out the exact requirements of specific tasks. It is therefore important that, although alternative/innovative ways of assessing students might be perceived as pedagogically progressive, one should always ensure the transparency of assessment criteria. This view is supported by Coffin *et al.* (2003:75) when they note that while

> innovative assessment practices may be desirable in their own terms, they may be unfamiliar to students and inconsistent with practices elsewhere. This tension suggests that innovation needs to be balanced against consistency; that there needs to be continuing dialogue between lecturers on related courses; and that assessment practices require explicit discussion with students.

Feedback opportunities that are created by assessment should, as far as possible, provide a non-threatening context for learning. Therefore, after the identification of the features of academic discourse that one would like to develop in students' writing, it may be more productive to reward the presence of such features, rather than

constantly emphasising their absence. One can therefore build on the students' strengths and not merely punish them for what they cannot do.

Discussions among writing educators indicate that although feedback on student writing might be given with the best of intentions, exactly the opposite is often achieved from what the educator actually wanted. In fact, there is a whole literature on the disadvantages of harping on error correction (cf. Truscott, 1996; 2004), and on the damage that this may do by inhibiting, rather than encouraging the production of academic text. Students regularly feel frustrated and disheartened by the feedback they receive on written assignments. There is thus a strong need to balance positive and negative feedback to students, because feedback is usually a judgement on the worth or value of what students accomplish and, as a result, strongly affective. Seen in this light, the provision of feedback is not only about being comprehensive and offering the appropriate feedback at the appropriate time, but also about how this feedback might influence the student affectively who produced the written assignment.

Although grammatical correctness is non-negotiable in the academic context, Parkerson (2000:125) suggests that it is helpful to "provide feedback only on grammatical errors that obscure meaning, and to encourage surface editing only when the student is close to the end of the writing process." Furthermore, she notes that although students need to know what they do wrong, it is as important with reference to positive affect for students to know what they are doing right. Writing educators would therefore do well in maintaining a careful balance in their comments on student writing, and not just criticise a piece of writing for its inadequacies. Yet, it is critical for students to develop their ability in noticing their own mistakes as well as those of others. Good course design should enable students to learn about the conventions of academic writing and to mobilise such knowledge about language in order to monitor the appropriateness and correctness of their own texts (also see the section on the inclusion of grammar in writing courses). Of course, there is always the question of whether students are at the right level to make such knowledge their own and utilise and apply it. So course design alone will not ensure its proper application after uptake: one also needs a lecturer who is tuned into the students' specific needs and

capacities to learn, at every stage in the instruction of writing. The aim must always be to make instruction affect both learning and acquisition.

Of further importance is the notion that if written assignments "are only discussed after having been fully marked, that is, corrected and allotted a mark, the students tend to simply want to 'put them away'" (Menck, 2000:226). It is therefore clear that the idea of writing as a process and offering appropriate feedback at the correct stage within this process is crucial for providing digestible feedback on students' academic writing.

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

An issue that relates to the existence of sub-discourse communities, is whether academic literacy (and more specifically, writing) courses should make use of subject-related materials in order to teach discipline-specific academic discourse. To this end, Harwood and Hadley (2004:12) observe that: " … appropriate corpora will reveal that it is dangerous as well as inaccurate to speak of accepting or flouting conventions without first considering the discipline in question." Coffin *et al.* (2003) are convinced that the most productive way to facilitate the development of academic writing is discipline-specific. They maintain that because writing differs across disciplines in the tertiary academic context, students are finding it difficult to meet the writing requirements in several different areas (Coffin *et al.*, 2003). Jackson (1995:157) also supports the notion that teaching such discourse must arise out of the content of the specific discipline. In contrast, Blanton (1998) maintains that it should not, since it is not the field of writing (language) specialists. The question that remains, then, is what content should be used that would engage the students' interest. Unfortunately, 'remedial' language classes carry with them much negative baggage that is not usually part of other courses that students **choose** to do. This very strongly influences how motivated students are in doing what they perceive as a remedial, and therefore often stigmatised, language course. I would rather argue that English for specific purposes (ESP) or English for academic purposes (EAP) courses provide an opportunity for the language expert to engage with the literacy requirements of other

fields, and although the language person might not have expert knowledge in such a field, he/she may still occupy students productively with a focus on language learning.

When one considers the importance of motivation in learning, providing a context that includes learning material that is perceived by students as contributing purposefully to their studies, is obviously central. Kutz (1998:41), for example, observes that "language learners will … learn out of communicative need, in real contexts in which language is pushed by meaning."

3.2.11 Include productive strategies that achieve a focus on language form

The issue of the inclusion or not of grammar in language courses still sparks heated debate among the language teaching fraternity. There is, however, increasing evidence for the positive effects of a focus on form in language learning. Long and Crookes (1992), for example, have argued that timely, selective attention on specific classes of linguistic items (a focus on **form**) is advantageous for language development. This does not, however, amount to a renewed focus on language **forms** (in the traditional structural sense of the word), but rather "the use of pedagogic tasks and other methodological options which draw students' attention to aspects of the target language code" (Long & Crookes, 1992:43).

In the context of academic writing, however, the ability to recognise one's own errors in writing is developed over an extended period of time through engaging in consciousness-raising activities about academic discourse. Academic writing courses would do well in providing such consciousness-raising opportunities to students in the form of, for example, peer editing of fellow students' writing, but also in students assessing their own writing according to specific guidelines. Lecturer feedback that focuses on grammar also appears to have a positive effect on student rewriting of texts (Fathman & Whalley, 1990:185). These researchers found that: " … writing accuracy does increase with teacher feedback that gives the location of grammar errors" (Fathman & Whalley, 1990:186). However, it should be emphasised again that the issue of error correction is part of a continuing debate that, at this stage, still reveals conflicting views on its effectiveness.

It is obvious that before one can devise a strategy for the inclusion of a focus on language form in writing courses, one should establish what learners' difficulties are regarding correctness in their use of academic discourse. It is further also important to know what specific language structures dominate academic discourse, so that selective attention could be given to such structures, should meaningful opportunities arise for doing so. A clear description of the linguistic features of academic discourse is essential in an endeavour to address correctness in writing.

3.2.12 Support and encourage the use of technology in writing

It is unlikely that students will subscribe to a process/multiple-draft approach to writing (as is supported by this study) if they need to rewrite assignments a number of times and do this by hand. If the technology of word-processing programmes is available on computer, why not make use of it? Such technology also offers devices such as spell checkers that can be used productively in achieving the desired level of correctness in student writing.

3.2.13 Focus on the interrelationship between different language abilities in the promotion of writing

In the tertiary academic context, it is impossible to discuss the process of academic writing without referring to academic reading as well. Before writing a first draft of an assignment, students usually need to gather information by consulting the latest literature on the topic. A crucial question is how students can be persuaded to practice 'deep reading' rather than 'surface reading' when collecting information for the assignment. According to Prosser and Webb (1993:9), deep reading has the potential of students actually forming a view on the assignment question, while surface reading is done just for the purpose of collecting facts and quotes. This is directly related to how students perceive essay writing in a specific field (in this case sociology) as being multi-structural - the essay as a collection of points, each related to the topic, but not contributing to a whole view of the topic, or relational – where the essay is seen as an argument and issues are included because they contribute to the coherence of the argument and not just because of some vague relation to the question (also see the discussion on hybrid approaches to writing in section 3.3 below).

3.3   Approaches in the development of writing

Grabe and Kaplan (1996) provide a comprehensive overview of research trends and educational practice in the teaching and learning of writing. These researchers come to the conclusion that:

> The overall picture emerging from the various research approaches and their different translations into writing practice is that there is some disagreement as to what will be the most appropriate curriculum for writing instruction (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996:33).

According to Coffin *et al.* (2003:9), there are mainly three approaches to the teaching of writing worldwide (cf. also Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). These approaches can be divided into:

1) product (text) approaches;
2) process approaches; and
3) writing as social practice.

Although similar in most instances to the above classification, Ivanič (2004:220-245) distinguishes between six 'discourses' or approaches to writing and writing pedagogy (cf. Weideman, 2007). She suggests that writing and writing pedagogy can be divided into a **skills discourse** (regularly discussed as the product approach), a **creativity discourse** and a **process discourse** (often confusingly conflated as both forming part of a process approach), a **genre discourse** (which will be discussed in this section regarding its affinity to the context of the writing event), and a **social practices** and **socio-political discourse** (mostly combined under writing as social practice). In her comprehensive discussion of these discourses, Ivanič proposes that a view of writing development that does not take into account all six these discourses will lead to an impoverished view of writing development. As one of the 'hybrid approaches' that strives to combine a number of distinct approaches towards addressing the writing issue, her proposal will be discussed under section 3.3.4 in this chapter.

There is no doubt, however, as Badger and White (2000) assert, that the last 20 years or so have been dominated by product and process approaches to the development of writing. The emergence of process approaches was mainly a result of a reaction

against specific insufficiencies of product approaches, just as the development of writing as a social construct in recent times was a reaction against the overemphasised focus of process approaches on the individuality of the writer.

Developments in how the teaching and learning of writing are approached have, to some extent, also been influenced by the most influential theories on language (but not necessarily on how languages are acquired and learnt) at specific times in the development of writing. Product approaches can trace their origins to the structural linguistic analyses of the text as product and an overemphasis on the form of language. Process approaches are aligned with more communicative and task-based proposals to language teaching where explanations about the structures of language (grammatical aspects) may sometimes be neglected in favour of communicative activities. Approaches that focus on writing as social practice may be traced to critical linguistics research that focuses on the social context in which language is used, while genre approaches can trace their history to systemic functional grammar as well as language for specific purposes (LSP) and English for academic purposes (EAP) (also see Grabe & Kaplan, 1996 for an extensive discussion on the development of these approaches).

A recurring problem that faces academic writing course designers is that, although criticism can be levelled against most approaches to the teaching and learning of writing, crucial aspects can be identified in all of them that are either not included in the others, or that are not given enough emphasis in other approaches. Although Weideman (2003a) argues against what could be called an indiscriminate eclecticism in the inclusion of 'bits and pieces' from every theory, method and approach into one chaotic whole, this decision seems more complicated in the development of writing. The choice about which approach to use in one's own practice and context might focus primarily on one approach, but will probably have to include features of the other approaches as well. This seems, in fact, to be indicated by the very history of various approaches to writing, in that they display continuities with what went before, as well as discontinuities. The point is not that eclecticism is bad, one approach good, of course. It is that the combination may result in contradictions in one's own approach, destroying its integrity, and that a too glib combination may fail to exploit the really useful elements of an approach (the truly new ideas it embodies), i.e. the

discontinuities. If one wants to include features of more than one approach in one's own, it therefore stands to reason that such a combination must be a reasoned and defensible one. The evaluation of such a combination will involve, in general terms, the extent to which it conforms to the criteria implicit to the three crucial issues articulated at the beginning of this chapter (Coffin *et al*, 2003:12): (1) whether the approach utilises relevant and appropriate **language** (use); (2) whether it enhances learners' **acquisition** of academic discourse; and (3) whether the **instruction** makes such learning possible. Specifically, the approach will have to make a combination that conforms to the thirteen requirements set out in 3.2 above.

There have been various proposals for how some approaches to the teaching and learning of writing can be combined to achieve the more effective functioning of such instruction. These proposals will be dealt with in section 3.3.4. Before we turn to these, the most prominent earlier approaches are first discussed and evaluated in the section below.

3.3.1   Product (text) approaches

According to Coffin *et al.* (2003:11), much emphasis has in the past been placed on 'text as product' in the teaching of writing in higher education. The focus of such teaching has included an emphasis on the correctness of textual aspects such as spelling, text structure, vocabulary and style. Text approaches are therefore mainly concerned with the different types of **knowledge** necessary for coherent and appropriate writing. Such research tends to focus on analyses of the written text and, more recently, on how texts are constructed. A great body of textlinguistic research is available that focuses on the surface/syntactic level of texts: syntactic analyses of texts, corpus research, the informational structure of sentences, and the cohesion of texts all tend to emphasise the text that comes about as a result of what the writer knows about language as well as the written mode of language. Because of the emphasis of early versions of text-based approaches on the text as product, there was obviously not much focus on how the learner/writer actually got to the point of producing an appropriate academic text:

> In short, product-based approaches see writing as mainly concerned with knowledge about the structure of language, and writing development as mainly the result of the imitation of input, in the form of texts provided by the teacher (Badger & White, 2000:153).

More recently, however, product or text-based approaches have emphasised the analysis of different established genres (also sometimes loosely referred to as text types) in academic writing, such as essays, laboratory reports, dissertations, etc. A genre approach will often include making explicit to students the textual requirements of different genres. Different genres will, therefore, be analysed together by instructors and students with regard to, for instance, the rhetorical purpose of the text and the relationship between writer and reader. Although genre approaches show some similarity to product approaches, they will be discussed in detail under the section focusing on writing as a social construct, since their affinity with writing and its social context can be seen as potentially their most productive characteristic feature.

3.3.2   Process approaches to writing

The second approach that is prominent in research on writing focuses on the process in which writers engage when constructing written texts. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) distinguish between an expressive, a cognitive, and a social-context stage in the writing process approach. Although these authors include a focus on the social context of writing under a process approach, this stage is discussed separately in the next section because of its recent and substantial influence on writing research.

According to Coffin *et al.* (2003:10), process writing "emerged from the individualist, expressivist impulse popular throughout education in the 1960s and 1970s, and parts of it retain much currency today." The expressive approach (what Ivanič, 2004 refers to as the 'creativity discourse') mainly involved expert writing practitioners relaying to novice writers what 'worked well' for them in their composing of texts. Advice given to novice writers often amounted to advocating "that writers [should] look for their authentic voices and be able to express themselves freely. … Writers should let their natural voices speak out" (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Although the expressive approach has been criticised on the grounds that it is mainly concerned with isolated, individual

writers and how their identities are expressed through their writing, and that it largely ignores the social context (and what is appropriate in such contexts) in which this writing is done, this approach has provided important input for more scientifically based approaches to the writing process. In fact, one of the continuities of later approaches to writing with earlier ones lies exactly in a more sophisticated, typified notion of 'voice' (cf. Zamel, 1998; Blanton, 1998).

Within the range of process approaches to writing, one also finds the cognitive approach, which focuses on providing cognitive accounts for the writing process. Influential research on providing a cognitive model for the writing process is that of Flower and Hayes (as discussed in Grabe & Kaplan, 1996:91-92). This model divides the composition process into three components: the composing processor; the task environment; and the writer's long-term memory. The composing processor generates the ideas and consists of the processes of planning, translating and reviewing. In the planning process, the writer generates ideas, organises information and sets goals. When writers create texts, they therefore translate the ideas previously generated into language that is then revised in a cyclical manner. This model focuses attention on how writers behave cognitively when creating written texts.

In general writing practice one finds a third model, that takes a more practically oriented view of the writing process, and attempts to explain what writers do when they construct texts. This view emphasises the productive use of writing strategies that could be equated to different stages of the writing process. Advocates of this and other interpretations of a process approach also emphasise writing as a process of learning (or writing to learn), through which ideas and arguments are developed. Such an approach would typically promote the practice of writing as a partly sequential, partly cyclical process that includes steps such as defining the problem/topic, prewriting, gathering information, analysing and synthesising information, writing a first draft, multiple revisions of drafts and editing a final draft. Coffin *et al.* (2003:41) note that: "A key aspect of process writing approaches is the importance of seeking and responding to the feedback of others while a text is under development." A typical description of a writing process can be found in Diagram 1, taken from a communications course for engineering students.

Figure 3.1   The writing process

Step 1 – THINK	• Think about your purpose in writing, your audience, and the register you will need to use.

Step 2 – GATHER	• Gather information, which could come from:
	  Research
	  Lectures
	  Reading
	  Your own knowledge and ideas
	  Problem solving
	  Discussion

Step 3 – SYNTHESISE AND STRUCTURE	• Synthesise the information you have gathered. • Structure it logically (plan), using the appropriate format, e.g. for a report.
Step 4 – DRAFT	• Write a first draft (including graphics). • Re-draft (many drafts might be necessary before you have an acceptable final version).

Step 5 – REVISE	• Ask yourself:
	  Assessment guide
	  Is the register appropriate to the audience?
	  Has an appropriate format been used?
	  Is the argument logically structured and cohesive (have connectors been well used)?
	  Are graphics clear and accurate?
	  Is the information accurate; are opinions supported by evidence?
	• Go back to the beginning, if necessary.

Step 6 – EDIT	• Check grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.
Step 7 – FINAL VERSION	• Write or type your final version neatly.

(Kotecha, 1994:24)

Writing is therefore seen as a recursive process in which a written text is reworked any number of times by an author (often in response to outside comment) towards a closer approximation of typically academic appropriateness and acceptability. This approach to writing is also sometimes referred to as a multiple draft approach.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to make a distinction between process writing and the writing process. While process writing focuses more on the writer and how he/she makes use of writing as a strategy to learn, the writing process refers to the model(s) consisting of specific steps/stages that writers are supposed to go through in their creation of texts. According to Leibowitz (2000:23), "the idea that writing supports learning is at the heart of the notion of writing as a 'process'". This approach stands in contrast with views that emphasise writing as 'product', since it emphasises not the single product, but the construction of several products in various stages of completion or acceptability. An important aspect in process writing is the inclusion of mechanisms for students to reflect on their own personal learning processes while engaging in academic writing. A typical mechanism for reflection would be an activity such as journal writing in which students document their own insights with regard to the process of how they learn.

Although process approaches to the teaching and learning of writing are still being used widely, these approaches have been criticised for their overemphasis of the writing process and, particularly, for the skewed focus on the importance of the writer's voice and the writer as sole creator of texts (particularly in the writing pedagogies that Ivanič, 2004 refers to as 'creative self-expression'). Apart from a neglect of the context in which writing takes place and its influence on writing, one typically finds in process approaches a disregard for the linguistic knowledge base needed by learners to become proficient writers. "Critics of process approaches … have argued that explicit teaching of the forms and conventions of academic writing must accompany any focus on process in order for students to gain control of dominant academic forms" (Coffin *et al.*, 2003:10).

3.3.3   Writing as social practice

In an approach that emphasises writing as social practice, the central notion is that writing does not happen in a vacuum, but forms part of a definable social context. Researchers working in this field "have proposed that a writing-as-a-process approach has little meaning outside of the social context which defines a particular writing purpose …. The essential point … is that writing can only be understood from the perspective of a social context and not as a product of a single individual" (Grabe &

Kaplan, 1996:94). Johns (1990:27) notes that in a social constructionist view "the writing product is considered a social act that can take place only within and for a specific context and audience." When applied to the context of tertiary academic writing, such a context clearly involves (a) that of the broader academic community as well as the more specific disciplinary communities within it and (b) how academic writing has evolved within such communities regarding the appropriateness of texts. In a social practices approach, students are encouraged to take on the identity of a member of a specific community – in this case, the tertiary academic discourse community. In this process of identification, students start to "identify themselves with the values, beliefs, goals and activities of those who engage in those [literacy] practices" (Ivanič, 2004:235). This approach therefore emphasises the social nature of academic writing in that students learn "how to 'be' particular kinds of people: to write 'as academics', 'as geographers', 'as social scientists'" (Coffin *et al.*, 2003:10).

What has been highlighted more recently, though, is that it is more difficult for some students to take on new identities. One reason for this is that students' own identities also have an influence on how they read and engage in academic writing. Hence, "educational background, ethnicity, cultural expectations and gender have all been shown to influence how students read academic texts and respond in writing" (Coffin *et al.*, 2003:11). It is therefore clear that students do not merely 'take on' a new identity, but probably incorporate new identities through a process of negotiation that involves a more complex process and which is strongly influenced by their own identities.

There further appears to be two related perspectives in social constructionism that focus specifically on a description of the nature of academic discourse. Firstly, there are those who support the idea of a tertiary academic community that is characterised by generic features of academic discourse, or of a core of tasks and basic academic language that students should learn when they are being socialised into this community. The second approach maintains that academic discourse is specific to the different discourse communities of different disciplines and that an understanding of general academic language will not suffice. One therefore needs to investigate how language is used in specific disciplinary discourse communities and base what one teaches on the results of such investigation.

Ivanič (2004) distinguishes between two related 'discourses' in writing as social practice approaches. What she refers to as a 'social practices discourse' of writing is similar to what has been discussed thus far about this approach. The other 'discourse' that forms part of a social approach - termed the 'socio-political discourse' – has developed in approaches known as 'Critical Literacy' or 'Critical Language Awareness'. In this framework, learners should develop

> … a critical awareness of why particular discourses and genres are the way they are: the historical and political factors which shaped them and shaped the patterns of privileging among them (Ivanič, 2004:238).

As has already been argued (see section 2.2), the revolutionary nature of extreme versions of a socio-political approach to writing, as well as the general absence of suggestions on how this approach can influence writing pedagogy, have led to increasing criticism on the potential contribution of this approach to the development of writing. An enlightening instance of this revolutionary nature is found in some of Bizzell's (1987) remarks on minority students' initiation into academic discourse at universities. Bizzell maintains that 'outsider' students should not be forced to acquire academic discourse, but that tertiary institutions should rather change to accommodate such students. Although largely impractical in this extreme injunction, Bizzell's contention does refocus the enquiry into academic discourse to some extent, to address also the guardians of such discourse, and what their responsibilities are in this regard as to becoming more aware of students' literacy backgrounds and needs, apart from offering support to students in acquiring such discourse.

It is also in the context of writing as a social construct that genre approaches to writing development have made their impact felt in recent times. We have remarked above on how subsequent approaches to writing contain echoes of earlier ones, i.e. possess continuities with approaches that preceded them, and, indeed, according to Badger and White (2000), genre approaches show similarities to product approaches in that the focus of writing development is also on the text and textual (linguistic) analysis of different textual genres with regard to what linguistic features are appropriate for such genres. The main difference between product and genre approaches is that where product approaches generally ignore the existence of writing happening in a specific social context, genre approaches emphasise that writing

differs according to the social context and the purpose for which it is produced, and that different linguistic resources and organisation of such resources would be employed for written genres to be appropriate for specific contexts. Examples of genres would include, for instance, letters of apology, law reports, academic articles, etc.:

> In short, genre-based approaches see writing as essentially concerned with knowledge of language, and as being tied closely to writing as social purpose, while the development of writing is largely seen as the analysis and imitation of input in the form of texts provided by the teacher (Badger & White, 2000:156).

3.3.4   Hybrid approaches

For Grabe and Kaplan (1996), the converging opinion of work on writing suggests that any writing intervention that focuses on the development of writing will have to account for three interrelated factors. The first factor emphasises what learners need to know with regard to the knowledge required for successful writing (e.g. knowledge about language and its uses). The second factor addresses probably the most problematic issue in writing development, in its focus on **how** students successfully acquire the skills/abilities that are necessary for writing adequately in a specific environment. The last factor focuses on the contextual nature of writing in the sense that one has to be aware of the social context in which writing takes place and how such a context may influence writing course design and the teaching and learning of writing (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996:36). The proposal from these authors also echoes that of Coffin *et al*. (2003) discussed earlier in this chapter, with the variation that the latter authors also highlight the importance of finding ways to utilise what writers as learners already know about writing and the use of language.

What is evident from Grabe and Kaplan's above perspective on writing is that these commentators support a view of writing instruction that attempts to combine evidence from the distinct approaches discussed previously into an approach that accounts for these approaches in an integrated manner.

Similarly, Badger and White (2000:157) base their process genre approach on the fact that the three approaches (product, process and genre) "are largely complementary, as becomes more apparent if we examine their strengths and weaknesses." While the main weakness of a product approach is that it neglects the process of writing, its strength lies in the fact that it recognises the importance of knowledge about texts. The process approach downplays the importance of linguistic input and does not focus strongly enough on different kinds of texts produced for a specific purpose in specific contexts. It does, however, provide a very strong focus on the writing process and the strategies included in this process. Genre approaches emphasise the social context and concomitant purpose of producing specific genres in writing, but do not place enough emphasis on the process writers use to produce texts. According to these authors: "An effective methodology for writing [instruction] needs to incorporate the insights of product, process and genre approaches" (Badger & White, 2000:157). They note that this can be accomplished either by choosing one approach and adapting it, or by combining all three approaches into one. This synthesis of all three approaches is referred to by them as the process genre approach:

> The essential idea here is that the writing class recognises that writing involves knowledge about language (as in product and genre approaches), knowledge of the context in which writing happens and especially the purpose for the writing (as in genre approaches), and skills in using language (as in process approaches) (Badger & White, 2000:158).

A second hybrid approach is a combination of the product (in this case genre) and process of writing. In their research, Prosser and Webb (1993) relate the process of undergraduate essay writing to the finished product. They show in this study that the way students perceive a task influences how they approach and engage in the task and, ultimately, what the product looks like. Through phenomenography (describing the experience of learning from the viewpoint of the student) they investigated how students approached essay writing specifically in sociology. Through genre analysis they then analysed the texts produced by these students with regard to their effectiveness in the academic, and more specifically, the sociology context. They found a very strong correlation between process and product:

> Students who adopted a surface approach [to reading] conceived of the essay as multi-structural and approached the writing of the essay with an intention to reproduce a series of points in a coherent way. They focussed their reading on listing

key points related to the essay topic, and focussed their writing on producing a coherent set of points in written form (Prosser & Webb, 1993:10).

It is these students who, in structured interviews, showed confusion regarding the writing task and what they tried to accomplish. These students also scored relatively low marks in the assessment of this task. On the other hand:

> Students who adopted a deep approach [to reading] conceived of the essay as relational and had an intention to present an argument in support of a particular point of view on the question. They focused their reading for the essay on relating each author's meaning to the question and to their own previous viewpoint, and in writing the essay focussed on the coherence of the overall argument in favour of a particular viewpoint (Prosser & Webb, 1993:10).

These findings emphasise the point made several times above, viz. that making a coherent argument is what typifies competent academic discourse production. It comes as no surprise, then, that the students described here generally received good grades for their essays, probably because they also engaged with the reading material on a level where it was possible for them to have an opinion about what they read and what ideas they chose as support for their argument/point of view on the issue/problem. Their essays were also much easier to read because of the presence of what Prosser and Webb call 'predictive scaffolding'. These are ways of signposting to the reader what to expect in the essay, such as, for example, the mentioning of all the main sections of the essay in the introduction.

Boeschoten (2005) (cf. also Weideman, 1981) provides a framework (see Figure 3.2 below) that clarifies sufficiently the interrelationship between process and product in academic writing. He maintains that in order to write an acceptable academic text, students need to understand and adhere to the conventions (the normative aspect) used by specific disciplines. Students further need to have diverse receptive and productive competencies (language competence; genre competence; stylistic competence; rhetorical competence; and critical reading competence) that would enable them to deal adequately with the literature they need to integrate into their writing in order to produce authoritative argumentation in their texts. The eventual text (or product) that is produced also has to adhere to the functional characteristics of academic texts with regard to citation, argumentation, logical structuring, etc. This view is fully aligned with the conclusion reached in Chapter 2 of this study (cf. 2.2

above), that makes a case for the typicality of academic discourse – a uniqueness that is derived from the typical norms for producing language in this context, as they are embodied in factual academic texts (products).

Figure 3.2   The relationship between process and product in writing
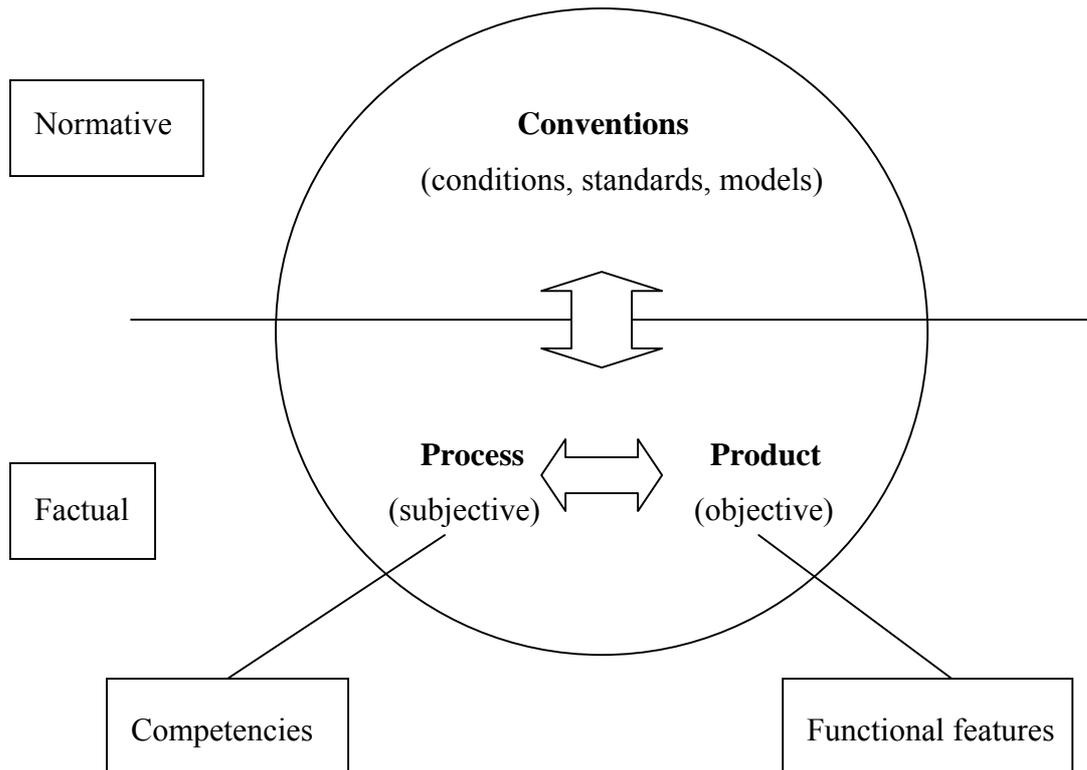
Boeschoten (2005:5)

Boeschoten's diagram reinforces and brings together Badger and White's contention with that of Prosser and Webb who believe that none of the three approaches discussed earlier in this section has the potential to offer an adequate approach to the teaching of academic writing on their own, and that a combination of approaches holds much more promise for offering a more comprehensive writing intervention to learners.

Contrary to the hybrid proposals already discussed in this section, Ivanič (2004) makes little mention as to what specific features/aspects she would combine with reference to the six different discourses (or approaches) she discusses (see section

3.3). She suggests that her 'framework' could be used as an analytical instrument (in essence, a research tool) in order to identify different discourses in academic textbooks as an awareness-raising exercise. Furthermore, it can be useful in coding interview data of teachers of writing talking about their practice and how such teachers make use of these six discourses in how they teach writing (Ivanič, 2004:240). But she comes close to the perspectives discussed above with regard to what she calls a 'holistic, comprehensive writing pedagogy'. She maintains that

> … written text, writing processes, the writing event, and the socio-political context of writing would be understood to be progressively embedded within one another, and intrinsically interrelated (Ivanič, 2004:241).

In yet another hybrid proposal for the teaching of academic writing, Harwood and Hadley (2004) propose a fusion between two seemingly irreconcilable approaches broadly referred to as Pragmatic EAP and Critical EAP (also see the discussion about critical approaches in Chapter 2). Their argument for proposing this fusion is supported mainly by the fact that, in reality, lecturers are often uncompromising in their demand for students to conform to dominant academic discourse norms. Writing educators would therefore not be doing students a favour in neglecting to teach and insisting upon students' conformity with such norms. Even more so, they might be setting up students for failure if they encourage a deliberate (and indiscriminate) flouting of academic discourse conventions. Furthermore, in the case of postgraduate students, they would find it very difficult to have their work published if they are not exposed to the dominant discourse norms of their disciplines (Harwood & Hadley, 2004:8-9). The point, of course, is that however important it is for students to find and develop original insight and articulate that (their 'voice'), it is equally important to remember that, in reality, global – mostly western – norms and standards apply.

Harwood and Hadley's proposal for what they call a **critical pragmatic approach** in the teaching of writing attempts to overcome the shortcomings of both approaches mentioned above through combining their positive aspects. In essence, they argue for an approach that, while still focusing on dominant academic discourse norms, encourages enquiring minds to ask why such norms are being used in specific academic disciplines.

3.4   Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted important considerations in the teaching and learning of writing as well as specific approaches to the teaching and learning of academic writing. The ultimate goal of a framework for the design of academic writing courses is to provide an instrument for the writing course designer/practitioner that enables such a person to create a productive learning environment that will present relevant opportunities for the development of writing ability. We find the beginnings of such a framework in the thirteen design principles discussed in 3.2 above. To a greater or lesser extent, these principles are articulated in each of the approaches reviewed above. We should therefore follow up this discussion with an analysis of how such approaches (or a deliberate, rationally justified combination of them) measure up to this overarching requirement.

The next chapter includes a focused interpretation of the insights gained in this chapter in a more comprehensive framework for course design and the teaching of academic writing courses in tertiary education.