1 Why write for academic journals?

What is academic writing? • Can it be learned? • Is it innate? • Reasons for writing • Reasons for publishing • Internal and external drivers • Career implications • Research profile • What is ‘research’? • Reasons for not writing • ‘I haven’t done any research’ • Intellectual capacity • Turgid writing • Narrow range • Pre-peer review • Guilt, fear and anxiety • Procrastination • The writing self • Team and collaborative writing • Barriers to writing • An integrative strategy • Checklist

This chapter explores the potential purposes of scholarly writing – why do we do it? What’s in it for us? The aim is to prompt readers, particularly if you have not published much or at all in academic journals, to address your motivations. These can be quite mixed. New writers are often ambivalent about academic journals, even, sometimes particularly, journals in their field, and this can be a barrier to writing. It is crucial to address the issues that come up most frequently in discussions at this stage; if the issues are not addressed, it is unlikely that there will be any writing.
If you are not a regular writer, you may have counter-motivations; there may be factors, people or strategies holding you back from writing. Alternatively, there may be achievements that occur because you do not write, and you may be worried about losing these if you have to devote time and energy to writing.

You may not like the kinds of writing you see in journals in your field. Many new writers express a strong antipathy to what they see there:

‘I don’t want to write that turgid stuff.’

‘I want to write something that I would want to read.’

‘No one will read it if it’s published in that journal.’

On the positive side, most new writers have something ‘in the locker’, something that they have been meaning to write about for some time. They may feel guilty, and may have to start by putting the sense of failure – at not having made more progress – behind them. In order to do this, some type of re-tuning of motivation might be necessary.

External drivers also impact on your motivation to write. Ironically, these sometimes interfere with internal, or intrinsic, motivations. Each writer has to work out his or her own answer to the question of why to write for scholarly publication. Important answers include developing your profile, progressing in your career and developing your understanding of your field. Once the ambivalence has been resolved, it is possible to reposition writing as valuable, feasible and enjoyable.

What is academic writing?

The craft or art of writing is the clumsy attempt to find symbols for the wordlessness. In utter loneliness a writer tries to explain the inexplicable.

(Steinbeck 1970: 14)

Academic writing is that set of conventions we see in a thesis or a published paper in our disciplines, a definition that becomes more precise once you scrutinize examples of published writing in your target journals.

Some argue that academic writing is a narrowly defined set of specialisms and knowledges, so narrow that it leaves ‘huge gaps in our understanding’:

It is the desire to think and write more, to fill some of these gaps that informs my desire to leave the academy – to think and write on subjects of my choice, in the manner that I wish to write, in whatever voice I choose.
There is so much emphasis on asserting a one-dimensional ‘voice’ in academic life. I enjoy writing about many subjects in different ways.

(hooks 1999: 141)

hooks argues that our subjectivity is ‘colonised’ in academic writing, and it is certainly true that across the disciplines subjectivity has traditionally had little or no value. This has begun to change recently, in some disciplines, but in others such changes are still seen as inappropriate to the enterprise of research.

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<th>Words associated with writing about research</th>
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<td>• objective</td>
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<td>• hierarchical</td>
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<td>• conservative</td>
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If hooks’ argument applies, then there are gaps not simply in the literature, but created by the literature. The academic approach to research – and the academic style available for writing about it – is inherently limited. Those who find it limiting are not necessarily limited themselves; it is important to acknowledge that much of what we think, say and do in the course of our work can become invisible when we publish.

That accounts for academic writing, the product, but what about the process? A published paper creates an illusion of linear progression, when, as we all know, writing is a dynamic, cyclical process. While the merits of published papers are often discussed, there is relatively little discussion of how writing actually gets done: what are the stages and how do we fit them into our other tasks? How do productive writers manage to get so much done? – a question to be asked not so much in awe or envy as in anticipation of a practical answer.

**Can it be learned?**

Whenever I introduce the subject of paragraph structure – and its role in argument – to a group of academics I inevitably use such terms as ‘topic sentence’. I ask them if they know what it means and, almost always, a silence falls. ‘Is that the silence of “We know this already, move on . . . or the silence of we don’t know, tell us now”’, I ask. Usually, a few immediately respond that they do not know. The point here is not that academics should learn jargon,
but that they do have gaps in their knowledge about how sentences and paragraphs work. This can affect not only how they talk about writing with their students, but also how they manage their own writing.

Writing can, of course, be learned. The problem is there are very few formal, or informal, opportunities to learn. One editor, speaking at a recent world conference, said that it was the universities’ job to provide training in academic writing, so that students coming through would be able to write well.

Feedback from journal editors and reviewers teaches us some lessons, but it is not advisable to set out to use them in that way. They will not appreciate it. Not all of them want to help writers learn; some would prefer all their submissions to be from ‘learned’ writers. Some of the more cutting reviews that we see may result from reviewers’ frustration at having to provide what they see as basic guidance. Some report that, in any case, they find it difficult to give feedback on writing. They do not always have an explanation for why a piece of text does not work; they simply know that it doesn’t.

If it can be learned, then can it be un-learned? People who do not write regularly, or who have stopped writing for a while, feel that they have lost the ability to write: ‘I’ve forgotten how to write’. The cure is, as always, to start writing again – ‘It’s not till I write that I realize that I can’ – but perhaps in new ways. It is possible to have a sense of your incompetence at the thought of writing, and this, if it goes on for long enough, can be aversive: it will stop you writing. This is something you have to find ways to avoid, if you are to write for academic journals.

Is it innate?

As for many other aspects of our professional roles for which we received no training or education, there is a tenacious myth that there are those who can write and those who cannot: ‘Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach. And those who can’t teach, teach gym/history/maths/law/education/writing/golf, other bias against a discipline.’

On the few occasions when writing ability is discussed in universities, there are popular assumptions about what makes some people productive writers, and it is not all about technical skill:

- These people are just good writers.
- Some are better at making time for writing.
- Those who publish are more selfish; they don't care about their students.

For new writers there is a potential double bind here: you should be able to write already on the basis on your education and experience, yet if you were really good enough you would already have written more than you have.
When academics talk about writing development, including training initiatives whose impact is evidenced in publications, senior colleagues, some initially and others serially, react with indifference at least and open scepticism at worst. This suggests that, across many different institutions, and in several countries, it is difficult to get past the remedial model: participation in writing development can be seen as a weakness.

The ability to write successfully for academic journals is not, of course, innate, although, interestingly, many people still think that it is. Yet, in the absence of formal training, perhaps it is true, ironically, that ‘those who can, do’, or can we rewrite that as, ‘In the past, those who could, already did’.

This is not an excuse for avoiding writing development or, importantly, writing discussions. There are strategies for productive writing and ways of making time for writing in the average over-loaded academic life. Perhaps you do need to think about being more ‘selfish’, if that means putting your priority – writing – first. Perhaps you do need to overcome the sense that writers are a breed apart. Perhaps you need to learn new tricks.

**Reasons for writing**

Since it can have so many effects, there is potentially a wide range of personal and/or professional reasons for writing:

- working out what you think, clarifying your thinking or starting to think;
- having a ‘rant’, letting off steam, ‘uncluttering’ your brain;
- telling others what you think;
- persuading others to take it on board.

This list is no more than a starting point for thinking about where you are in what could be seen as a continuum between writing for yourself and writing for others: which is more important to you now?; which do you feel more ready to do?; which do you want to do in the short term? Starting today? If you have always had a feeling – as many have – that you would like to write, if only you knew how to go about it, then now is the time to start.

The general purpose of this book is to make a case for two kinds of writing: writing for yourself and writing for others. Writing for others, particularly for academic journals, can sometimes seem too constraining; writing for yourself, if you can silence your internal editor, is a crucial way to make sure that you develop your idea, your voice and your confidence.

Some writers argue that they like writing and do not lack confidence, but see no reason to get into print. They have other ways, they argue, of gaining professional recognition and other outlets for their communications than academic journals. Of course, this is always an option, as long as you are clear...
about and comfortable with any consequences there may be for your career. And what about consequences for your learning? Where will you find the kind of hard critique provided by journal reviewers?

**Reasons for publishing**

Your reasons for publishing may be much more closely linked to external drivers – and to other people’s criteria – or, perhaps, to your awareness that you are expected to establish such a link.

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<th>Reasons for publishing in academic journals</th>
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<td>• career progression – moving up to the next rung on the ladder</td>
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<td>• gaining recognition for work you have done</td>
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<td>• stopping someone else taking credit for your work or using your materials</td>
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<td>• personal satisfaction of completing a new goal</td>
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<td>• setting yourself a new challenge</td>
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<td>• helping your students to gain recognition for their work</td>
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<tr>
<td>• learning how to write to a higher standard</td>
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<tr>
<td>• contributing to knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>• building your institution’s status</td>
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<td>• developing a profile</td>
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Some of these reasons are more altruistic than others. Co-authoring with students, for example, can help them in their search for a good job after graduation, in some professions. They will certainly have learned from publishing, provided you allow them to participate in the process, and you will have modelled a form of continuing professional development. In addition, if you have not published before, this is an excellent way of developing a small-scale piece of work for a journal.

**Internal and external drivers**

For writing, as for other professional tasks, there is a complex mixture of internal and external motivations. What is interesting is that when it comes to writing for academic journals, these motivations sit in opposition and can...
work against each other. Even in discussion among those who want to write for journals, there can be resistance to actually doing it.

Both external and internal drivers may combine if your aim is to get on in your career, yet this might be complicated by your ambivalence towards the writing you see published in the journal articles in your field. You may be ambivalent about joining what you see as a big ‘game’. You may even develop feelings of antipathy towards those who regularly publish, particularly if they are in promoted positions. This may be compounded by your or others’ scepticism at the whole promotion process, and this, too, can undermine your writing.

When I say, in an attempt at humour rather than cynicism, in writers’ workshops that the quickest, surest way to get published is to change your first name to ‘Professor’, there is often rueful laughter, followed by an important discussion of the differences between papers published by those who already have a body of work and an established profile in the discipline and those published by ‘unknowns’. Of course, reviewing should be blind, but sometimes it isn’t, and even when it is, it is often easy to identify the authors from their references. The important lesson is that once you yourself have a body of work and experience, you too may write quite different types of papers; they may be very different from your first published paper.

Internal drivers include your intention genuinely to develop your writing skills, yet you may feel ambivalent about feedback you receive from peers and reviewers. You may invest time in researching a journal, yet feel that they have ‘missed the point’ of your paper, or been too harsh in their critique, or that they seem to be confusing it with another paper entirely. You may flat out disagree with the feedback. The criticisms may indeed be unfair and unhelpful, but your reaction may be as much about the emotional side of receiving criticism of your writing. You have, after all, invested so much of yourself in it. Until you have been through the process several times, you may find yourself taking criticism personally.

It will come as no comfort to know that as your knowledge of journal writing deepens, you may uncover new layers of ambivalence: you know what you are doing now and resent reviewers who still write as if they assume that you don’t. This might be the best indication yet that it is an on-going struggle to bridge the gap between your internal and external drivers. You may continue to feel that what started out as your distinctive voice has morphed into journal-speak. It will be important, particularly when you are getting started, to have a way to refocus on what’s in it for you to publish in academic journals.

There are those who will find all of this a bit pathetic; of course we all have to publish as part of our jobs – why all the ambiguity? Surely it is your responsibility to add to the store of knowledge and to keep yourself up to date for the sake of your students? If this is your view, you will, in theory, find it easier to make time and space for your writing, although when you start to, for the first time, there will be consequences for other people:
You have to be very clear, if you want to write, what place it occupies in your life. I’m afraid that if you’re ambitious, it often has to have first place – it sometimes has to take precedence over human relationships and anything else.

(Mantel, quoted in Roberts et al. 2002: 75)

Even if you just want to ‘get on’ in your career, that is, you do not necessarily want to get to the very top – far from it, perhaps – there are those who will be ready to label you as ‘ambitious’. Even if you simply want to be acknowledged for your work by promotion, there will be those who see you as selfish. No matter how much time and energy you plough into other roles, supporting students when no one else will, representing your department on more than your share of committees, and being course leader on more courses than two or more of your colleagues, there will be people in your peer group who refuse to see all your efforts. ‘How did you find time to write’, they wonder, ‘if you really are so busy?’ Come the day you actually do defer a task to finish a paper, there may be a cataclysmic reaction. You may be branded as someone who is prone to ‘dropping the ball’ for the rest of your career.

The point of this one-sided narrative is to characterize another type of external driver: the increasingly negative reactions – real or imagined, both can have real impact – that your writing may provoke in other people. These can drive against your writing, convincing you to make less time for it, not more. You do have to make writing more important than anything else at some point, in order to get it done at all. If you never make it the priority you will never do it. You have to ask yourself, what exactly are you waiting for?:

Write as if you are dying. It works. Imagine if you’ve only got a year to live or something. I think that’s the best motivator to get you to do it.

(Gemmell, in Roberts et al. 2002: 57)

While this view will seem extreme to some, it does raise the question of how long you have, if you wait another year or two, to get started and to become a regular writer for academic journals.

**Career implications**

You may not enjoy the career appraisal or review process – that more or less statutory discussion with your head of department or director about your progress and goals, and you may not even find it useful, but it does give you an opportunity to make connections between what you want to do in your writing and what your department or unit values.
These connections are not always apparent to heads and managers, who, for various reasons, may never actually read what you write. The same goes for promotion time: do not expect senior officers to read your work, or even to have a grasp of its significance in your field, or in any sense. They are just as likely to read your publications as you are to read theirs – not at all likely. As long as they don’t stop you doing what you want to do – in your writing – you can consider yourself to be in a fairly privileged position.

You may think that your work is so directly linked to your department’s priorities that it hardly needs to be said. Think again. Take every opportunity to make that link explicit. As you develop your publication plans and intentions, think about how you can, if not ‘align’, then simply explain them in terms that are relevant to the department. In some disciplines, this will be superfluous; in fact, you may think the whole process of formal career review is superfluous. But in some areas, and perhaps at some times, it is much more important to make these links explicit. No one will do this for you; it may be that no one else could.

As you are contemplating the publishing dimension of a ‘career’, therefore, you may have to update your answers to three questions:

1. What are the precise or general targets for publishing in your area/department?
2. Have you discussed with your head of department – as part of your appraisal or review – how you will meet those targets, including resources you will need?
3. Did you get general or specific, formal or informal, agreement to your publishing plans from your head of department?

Find out, if you can, how others would answer these questions, noting the interesting array of answers and areas of convergence. Note any dislocations, however minor, between the stated agenda and what is going on in practice, without, if you can avoid it, becoming too involved in what others are doing or not doing. You have no control over that, and is it really any of your business? If there is a problem with someone else’s written work being published, surely it is your boss’s problem?

If you feel that your work would be more valued in another area of the university, there may be possibilities for your publications to be entered into the local research ‘accounting’ system in another unit. In some disciplines, this would be ridiculous and possibly damaging to your career, but you might be surprised at the flexibility of the discipline bases when there are financial consequences. There are many ways in which being published in academic journals brings you external ‘credit’; the question is how can you ensure that any credit also counts internally, whenever possible?

This is not to say that your output should be fixed for your entire career. You may want to do different types of writing for publication at different stages in your career, from ‘initial career’, when you might be developing publications
from your thesis; to ‘middle career’, perhaps a time to write a single-authored book; to ‘later career’, when you might be asked to write a guest contribution to an edited volume (Blaxter et al. 1998a: 140). Again, it depends on your discipline and, above all, on your understanding of how people construct a programme of publications at different stages in their careers. Take a look at a few web sites: what and where are junior and senior researchers publishing in your discipline or sub-discipline?

**Research profile**

Are you thinking ahead? Do you want to be published in certain journals, not in others, and think you have no chance of getting into the ‘big ones’? It may seem premature to be thinking of developing a research profile, but your first publication may present you to the research community in a particular way. It is important that you can live with that. Even better if you are making a conscious choice, even if it is a compromise determined as much by where you think you can get published as by where you would really like to be published.

If you want to develop a profile, will you have to focus your publications in a certain area, not publishing too widely? Or will you be able to use diversity, in your writing, to make a broader impact?

**What is ‘research’?**

I discovered long ago in collecting and classifying marine animals that what I found was closely intermeshed with how I felt at the moment.

(Steinbeck 1962: 181)

This suggests that what constitutes ‘research’ will be closely related to your own interests. All sorts of studies count as research, in some disciplines, and the growing rigour and credibility of a range of qualitative methods has opened the door for those who do not want to learn statistics, for example.

Research is as much about the work you are currently doing, including teaching, as anything else. If you have expertise, experience and a profile in an area, then it makes sense to find your research in that area, unless you hate it with a passion. If you can find the right journal, and can construct a sufficient contribution, then you have a potential publication.

For example, a brief survey of the sub-field of social work dealing with residential childcare produced the following in published papers:
WHAT IS ‘RESEARCH’?

1 This is both a review of . . . as well as an attempt to place the issue in a practical and reasonable context (Anglin 1999)
2 A theoretical model is offered . . . (Pazaratz 2001)
3 The author draws upon 30 years of experience in . . . (Gavin and Lister 2001)
4 This article looks at how . . . There is a discussion of practical skills and training directions (Ziegler 2001).

The first example shows how what the author considers an ‘issue’ can be the subject of review and academic examination, while still being relevant to practice, a feature important to many new writers. The second example demonstrates that a new model, developed by the author, can make an important contribution. The third explicitly draws on extensive experience, making the case that this is itself an important body of knowledge. In the fourth, relatively non-academic terms such as ‘looks at’ and ‘discussion’ have clearly been judged sufficient for publication. Such options will not be available in all fields, but they are available in more fields than many new writers are aware.

In other fields, personal experience, the personal voice and the first-person, ‘I’, are off-limits, both stylistically and philosophically. In some disciplines, they simply cannot constitute the ingredients of new knowledge. This will be obvious to writers in those disciplines, but it is important that writers in other disciplines are not put off by these criteria. You will know what does and does not count as new knowledge from your reading. This is no time to be distracted by writing – and what other people say about writing – in other disciplines than your own.

Brew (2001) has argued that academic research – not just the writing that is published about it – is itself narrow, requiring closer links to living with uncertainty, ambiguity and the actual processes of researching. Calling for more ‘reflexivity’ and ‘critical questioning’, Brew opens up new possibilities, in some disciplines, for a rigorous critique of research itself and the development of new ways of thinking: ‘we cannot escape seeing an outdated epistemology infusing practice’ (p. 177). There is also a prompt here for analysis of practice. In other words, while experienced colleagues may attribute your views on the narrowness of academic writing in your discipline to your inexperience and naivety, you have grounds for critiquing existing work and established principles. There is bound to be some such critique in your own discipline; you will not be the first to have these feelings or ideas about academic writing in your discipline.

Even failure – with, of course, a careful definition of what constitutes ‘failure’ – can be a fruitful topic for academic writing:

Research must acknowledge its disasters as well as its achievements; its rigidities as well as its creativity; its power and its powerlessness; its openness and its dogmatic blinkers.

(Brew 2001: 186)
Research can be quite narrowly defined, but acknowledging that narrowness, carefully identifying its nature and form, can strengthen your arguments. (Identifying the ‘causes’ of such narrowness would be a much more complex argument – cause-and-effect arguments are much more complex than the simple argument about the ‘way things are’.) A key problem for researchers in many different fields is about how such critiques can be made credible and robust.

Brew (2004) has analysed the conceptions of research held by established senior researchers and has identified four categories of research experience:

The domino (series of tasks), trading (a social phenomenon emphasizing products), layer (excavating reality) and journey (research transforms the researcher).

(Brew 2004: 214)

Whether or not you feel you already have, or aspire to, one of these, it is as well to consider your own orientation as something real, part of your identity and, therefore, worth naming. Otherwise your concept of ‘research’ might remain amorphous and even internally contested. Work out where you are coming from, what definition of ‘research’ is meaningful to you and then you can start to give the tasks, trades, layers or stops on your journey some definition in real time and space and among real people. Brew’s perspective, it should be noted, is underpinned by her research – phenomenography – uncovering the actual lived experience of researchers.

Of the orientations Brew describes, the ‘trading’ variation is interesting for its social nature:

Whether the research outcomes are conceived in terms of publications, research grants, the achievement of objectives or social benefits, more often than not in this variation, research is described in terms of relationships, activities or ideas of other people (e.g. research assistants, collaborators or other researchers in the field).

(Brew 2004: 221)

This implies that networks, collaborations and beneficiaries, in a variety of senses, are positioned in the research process at a more than conceptual level. A related aspect of this variation, one that might link directly to writing – interesting that Brew uses the word ‘variation’, perhaps to emphasize plurality – is the idea that research is for an audience. Clearly, this suggests that it is important to develop not just an internal sense of audience, but also real external audiences, for our research and writing.

The strongest link to writing is, in fact, with this trading orientation, as Brew illustrates with a quotation from one of the participants in her study:

I’m with the school that believes you should always be writing while you are researching and I always tell my . . . students too, that it’s fatal just to
go away and read for a year. You should always be writing, . . . even if what you have written is discarded you should always be writing . . . Half the time is reading, half the time is writing.

(Brew 2004: 222)

This suggests that if you want to publish research regularly you should get yourself into the habit of writing during the research process, but that you should not try to do all this on your own; your social situation, including the social context of your life in academe, can enable or inhibit your writing. This last point may come as no surprise; many academics who want to write identify lack of support as a barrier. But you need to take steps to change this: take time to build peer relationships that will provide a forum, both critical and supportive, for your research. Develop some of this ‘trading’ mentality and find others who have it too. Brew (2004) argues that the trading variation is more likely to lead to publication.

You will, of course, come across others with whom you want to work, but whose orientation towards research clashes with yours. This may mean that they can, for a while, perhaps not forever, serve as research colleagues for you and you for them. Getting your different definitions of ‘research’ out into the open at an early stage will help you bridge the gap. This discussion may also sharpen your understanding of research.

To complicate matters further, you may change your orientation to research as you do more of it, or as you write more about it or as you learn more from feedback from reviewers. This too could be the topic of discussion, as long as the driver is the focus on external products (the trading variation).

Much of this, including what some will see as the potential narrowness of Brew’s or others’ conceptions of research, can itself be a topic for your writing. In fact, in some disciplines, the question of what does and does not constitute research is a recurring subject of debate, and not just in the academics-versus-practitioners direction. Looking across a range of disciplines, you can see that making the case for your research as sufficient to be given the name is often among the first steps in academic argument. This is another reason to write about it.

Alternatively, you can use this as an ‘excuse’ to get started: writing about potential orientations towards research, writing your response to Brew’s ‘variations’, writing about your work in relation to what others have called research and constructing links between the two could be an important part of your re-orientation as a researcher.

You can take this a step further and consider writing in different forms – as a conscious development process, but with the possibility of publication in mind – such as narrative: outline your history as a researcher; describe your journey towards research; describe your attitudes, feelings and approaches at different stages in the process. What might start out as exploratory writing might become redefining, recovering and developing an identity as a
researcher: how are you positioned as a researcher or writer in your scholarly community?; is there integration or alienation?

This is not just a matter of writing a 'how I see myself now' snapshot diary entry or essay, but more a matter of writing yourself back into research. Many people who are new to research, and to academic writing, have at some stage in their career written themselves out of research and, as their careers take shape, have found it difficult to write themselves back in.

Although academic writing in your discipline may not allow such subjectivity, there are potential benefits in developing a subjective response to research; it may be important for your long-term motivation. If academic writing – and a great deal of research – has its origins in a set of positivistic assumptions, then it may be productive to explore the limits of those assumptions. In some disciplines, their dominance is being eroded in any case. In others they are ripe for challenge: 'Historically, subjectivity has been the privilege of those with the power to control institutional discourses' (Bensimon 1995: 599).

Academic discourses have been constructed over time, they have been tried and tested and are now widely trusted; but this does not mean that the 'rules' will never change. It is not only cynics, the excluded and the disenchanted who take issue with what constitutes research. Some creative thinkers never tire of challenging the status quo.

In some disciplines, this will seem like wasting time; there is no need to develop an orientation, since researching – and writing about it – is obviously what researchers do. Yet Brew's research did include a wide range of disciplines, and so we can learn from that work what established senior researchers see as research, and there are even hints about how they do it. Surely this is a better way of learning about research than 'simply getting on with it'?

**Reasons for not writing**

Reasons given for actively taking up a position of not writing give insights into the nature of professional workplaces and the terms and conditions of those who are expected to write for publication at this time:

- I don’t have any time for writing.
- I can’t write in my office.
- I’m not ambitious.
- My teaching comes first.
- I review papers regularly, but I don’t write myself.
- I don’t want to play the publications game.
- I’m too tired when I get home to do any writing.
- I resent giving up so much of my personal time.
- I do a lot of writing, just not for publication.
No one will read it anyway.
I’m probably just afraid of rejection.
I don’t write well.

Many reasons for not writing have their origin in lack of confidence. This in turn is sustained by lack of education about the characteristics of high-quality academic writing – the product and the process – and lack of clear goal setting. Those who decide that the problem lies not with academic writing but with their deficiencies can congratulate themselves on being right: they are right in the sense that there is a gap in their knowledge about how academic writing is produced. Even those who do have some knowledge may have a ‘knowing-doing’ gap, whereby they have accumulated the knowledge without developing the practice.

In some cultures, identifying your ‘deficiencies’ or ‘needs’ helps to determine the content of courses or other activities you need to take in order to develop; in other cultures the very idea of ‘deficiencies’ amounts to an admission of failure and the line stops there. Yet, we can all theoretically, comfortably admit that no one can know everything about academic writing; everyone learns something about it from doing it. The paradox is that people still fault themselves for not having learned more when no teaching was available in the first place. The problem is that there is little or no discussion about how advanced writing – that is, beyond the level of high school – is learned, about who needs to learn or about which modes of learning might work best for them.

You may feel that you already know that your work ‘makes a difference’ and feel no need to ‘publish for publishing’s sake’; you may feel that there is really no point. Secure in your knowledge of your work’s significance, you decide not to write.

There are, therefore, reasons behind the reasons: like many, many others, you may find that you lack the education, support and environment for writing. The sooner you admit that you can learn about writing, the better. Then you can set about looking for a course, group, mentor, programme or web site. The activities in this book will help you to start, progress and complete a paper, if, that is, you actually do them.

‘I haven’t done any research’

This barrier to writing is popular among academics in new universities or disciplines in which writing for publication is new. Many think they simply have nothing to write about.

Consequently, it seems to be an important part of the process of becoming an academic writer to take the time thoroughly to thrash out what does and
does not constitute research in your discipline and, possibly, to broaden your
definition of research for your area, a point covered in an earlier section.

The point to make here is that until you have reconfigured your work and
your ideas – in writing – they will continue to seem far too modest for a paper
in an academic journal. Yet, most papers do make modest contributions.
Define what yours is, as this is an essential element of most papers anyway.
Until you do, the voice telling you that you did not do that work as ‘research’,
and therefore should not be representing it as such, will keep droning on and
may stop you writing.

**Intellectual capacity**

Some years ago, in the midst of my discussion of ways to become an effective
and efficient writer, one academic responded, ‘Well, yes, that’s all very well.
But you’re assuming that everyone has the intellectual capacity to write for
publication. Not everyone does, you know.’ Well, yes, I had been assuming
that everyone in the group of academics in front of me was capable of finding
something to publish somewhere. It was not my remit to judge writers’ capa-
city; nor was I qualified to do so across the range of disciplines represented in
the group.

It is a legitimate question, but what was he really asking? The intellectual
capacity to do what? To analyse the literature, to work out what still needs to
be done and to plan a piece of writing about that? And how would that intel-
lectual capacity have been measured? Do we all need to have first-class under-
graduate degrees? PhDs with distinction? Royal Society Fellowships? What
would be sufficient demonstration of ‘intellectual capacity’?

And how would that intellectual capacity have been developed in the first
place; could it be that writing for academic journals is one way of developing
it, teaching us how to raise the standard of our work and our writing? You have
to handle the question of your intellectual ability very carefully; it can be
transformed into a reason not to write. Much of what experienced writers
know about writing for publication was learned through writing for
publication.

Many people will challenge your ability to write for academic journals. This
challenge may also be legitimate, though its relentless repetition can be wear-
ing. Academics deemed ‘non-research-active’ may have to justify time devoted
to writing. Most academics and professionals will have no dedicated writing
time anyway.

Whatever your starting point, it is possible to develop your knowledge,
understanding and skills – without wanting to get into the debate about
whether or not that means developing your intellectual capacity – through
writing for publication. Writing provides one of the few opportunities to
develop. The purpose of your academic writing is to persuade readers to think about your ideas, at least, but it is also to develop those ideas. This requires you to accept that no matter how many hours you put into making your paper ‘perfect’ you will still make mistakes, produce weak arguments and overstate your claims. You will also find ways to strengthen your research.

In the end, I do still assume that everyone has something to write about. The question is, can you find the right place to publish it?

**Turgid writing**

They make it so tedious – footnotes and bibliographies! They’re just ridiculous. Who cares what you read? Just get on with it.

(Ellmann, quoted in Hanks 2003)

New writers are often dismayed at what they find in academic journals. They reject the inherent value of papers published in a style they do not like. They resist the implicit injunction to ‘write that way’. They reject the opportunity to transform their ideas into a new genre. They use the dominant styles and structures to construct an argument for not writing for academic journals.

This argument then provides a rationale for not writing at all; after all, the argument goes, who would want to join such degraded, self-serving, navel-gazing debates? They come to see the whole business of writing for academic journals as just ‘playing the publications game’. In many discussions I have heard this literally transformed into a reason not to write for academic journals at all. Again, that is, of course, an option, but not one explored in this book.

Critiquing the dominant norms and forms of academic journals is an important activity. Negotiating the extent to which we choose to reproduce what we find there is an essential part of the writing process. Seeing publication as some kind of ‘game’ can stimulate new writers to find out what the ‘rules’ are and how the ‘referees’ apply them, so that they can then go off to ‘train’ and ‘play’. Discussing the pros and cons of targeting journals that we do not enjoy reading – though they might ‘count’ heavily in external scoring systems – is an important stage in developing motivation to write at all.

The key point is that colleagues will not read our writing, no matter how fresh we think our style is, if we do not make some allowance for their perspective. Writing for academic journals is not about performance; it is about persuasion. This means that we always have to adjust our writing style to suit our audience. You have to at least consider adopting some features of the so-called ‘turgid’ style. This might require a change of your perspective: for example, if you think some points in the articles are too laboured, sentences too long and
ideas too obvious, this might indicate areas that have to be very carefully argued in that journal, ideas that are more contested than you thought they were and/or the extent to which you have to embed your ideas in existing work for that specific journal.

The decision not to write for a journal because you do not like its style – or any other aspect of its content or presentation – is superficial. It may even indicate a lack of understanding of why the journal is written in a certain way. Accepting that you may have something to learn from analysing – and producing – a different style is more likely to develop your writing skills and your understanding of what it is that gets published in your field.

This is a contentious point; feelings run high in discussions of what constitutes ‘acceptable’ writing. Personal preferences are very powerful; people have very strong views on and feelings about what constitutes good writing. Once we have our preferences in perspective, we can begin to see that a range – not infinite – of options is open to us, one of them being to redefine what you think is ‘turgid’.

**Narrow range**

For some, the range of writing options available in academic journals is just too narrow; others see this as a plus as it helps them decide what to write and how.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Finding options in the narrow range</th>
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<tr>
<td>Only certain topics are accepted</td>
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<tr>
<td>They do not publish my method</td>
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<td>We’re never allowed to write ‘I’</td>
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Those who have not published are often uncomfortable with this approach, seeing it as exactly the kind of game-playing they despise. But it is about being rhetorical. It involves looking for a way to join a conversation that has been going on, in the literature, for some time.
Most people who have spent any time in a university will know how important peer review is for many aspects of academic work. Fewer will be aware of how important it is to get feedback – ‘pre-peer review’ – on your writing before you submit it to a journal. You may think your writing is not ready to show to anyone else. It is probably a good idea not to expect that feeling to go away.

What makes people keep their writing from others? Lack of confidence? Unsure of how it might help them? Unsure of what sort of feedback they are looking for? A bad experience: they gave writing to someone once and were severely critiqued? Not leaving enough time; just wanting to submit it?

If you have had bad feedback on your academic writing before, why was that?: did you ask for the type of feedback you needed?; did you say you wanted constructive feedback?; or did you take it for granted that that was what you would get?; did you just react too emotionally or too analytically to the feedback?; did you ask the wrong person? All of these must happen sometimes, but the trick is to keep going.

In a ‘pre-peer review’ you might be looking for feedback on the continuity of your argument. Does it seem convincing? Does it make a contribution? Does it seem appropriate for the journal you are targeting? That might be plenty. Write these questions on a separate page, staple it to your paper, highlight them in colour, put it all in a plastic envelop so that the front sheet cannot become detached, give them or discuss with them a deadline by which your reader will return it to you.

I once asked a senior colleague for feedback on a paper that had been returned with major revisions required. Eight months later he put it in my mail tray with one comment written at the top of the first page: ‘I presume this has already been submitted’. Why did that happen? In hindsight, I can see that he was not the right person, but I could only have found that out by asking him in the first place.

Another way of getting feedback in the early stages of the development of a paper is to email the editor to check that both your proposed subject and what you intend to say about it are of sufficient interest – as they see it – to readers of their journal at all. Without this early checking, it would be possible to write a paper that they are generally interested in, but that takes a direction that they consider moves away from their area of interest.
This is not to say that every writer has to have every type of feedback; it can be difficult enough to find one person who is prepared to supply feedback of any kind. The purpose of this list of pre-peer reviewers and their possible roles is to prompt new writers particularly to think laterally about finding feedback.

Don’t forget to tell your reader what type of feedback you are looking for; it can save everyone time and effort. This is easier said than done: people are very busy; they do not have time to read each other’s work.

### Guilt, fear and anxiety

Many people report that they can be quite creative in finding ways to avoid writing: several cups of coffee, checking references or emails, putting on the washing. There have even, apparently, been one or two very clean bathrooms. There is potential distraction in an almost endless list of domestic and professional tasks. These avoidance tactics are probably related to uncertainties about the writing project, but they may also be related to writing itself. How many of us were ever taught a range of writing strategies for getting started quickly?

Some consider their displacement activity as an essential step in the writing process, even if they are not entirely happy with it. This is often cited as a reason for not trying the generative strategies that are proposed later in this book: ‘What can I possibly write in half an hour? It takes me half an hour to get started.’ They believe that they cannot simply ‘start writing’.

Whatever the purpose or value attributed to such beliefs and behaviours, if they work to stimulate your writing, then all is well. If they do not, guilt follows. Guilt at not having done ‘enough’ is a recurring theme in writers’ discussions.

Fear and anxiety recur so often that it seems important to spend some time...
building confidence (Moore 2003). If you want to become a successful academic writer, it might not be enough simply to learn more about the technical skills; it might be equally important to invest time in developing your confidence through new types of writing activity, dealt with later in this book. The institution in which you work is not likely to change, in order to give you more time to write and more recognition for your writing, but you can develop an identity as a writer within that context. Over time, as you publish more, guilt, fear and anxiety diminish.

Before you start to see yourself as a neurotic or timid loser, you should consider the very real risks that you run by submitting your work to an academic journal. While ‘risks’ is perhaps the wrong word – some might say ‘challenges’ – it nevertheless feels risky:

- Your work is subjected to the hardest critique you have known.
- Experts scrutinize your research and your writing.
- You make mistakes.
- You ‘put your head above the parapet’.
- You attract criticism.
- You unintentionally criticize an authority, causing conflict.
- You develop your argument beyond what you can logically claim and beyond the evidence.

These are not imaginary risks; writing for academic journals means writing at the edge of your – and perhaps others’, though they may not admit it – certainty. Until your paper has been peer reviewed, you may not be sure that you have made a contribution. If you are submitting your first paper, there are more potential risks:

- What you have decided not to say is seen as a serious omission.
- Your critique of others’ work is seen as too strong.
- Your statement of the problem is seen as too general, under-referenced.
- Linking your work with that of established figures is seen as presumptuous.

Once you are a successful, published author, there are new risks:

- Unsuccessful colleagues passively or actively loathe you.
- Your growing confidence is seen as arrogance.
- The area you publish in becomes devalued in your institution.

The trick is to get to grips with these potential risks, work out which ones are holding you back and discuss them with trusted colleagues who want you to succeed.

We have all had these thoughts. We all have our particular trigger, the one that makes us lose confidence from time to time. The bad news is that it may stay with you – simply publishing papers will not make all these rational and
irrational fears and anxieties go away. The good news is that it will make you strengthen your arguments.

In practice, over time, these thoughts can become quite destructive prompts for writing, that is, prompts that tell you not to write (see Chapter 3 for more on writing to prompts). They can also make you lose focus in your writing, as you try too hard to strengthen your arguments. This may be why so many new writers put so much into their first drafts of their first papers. They often have two or three papers’ worth of material, but feel that they need to bolster their paper, when, in fact, making the case for the work you did or making the proposal that it needs to be done may be publishable papers in their own right, in some disciplines.

This section has gone into fears and anxieties in some depth because new writers do seem able to find many reasons not to get started, or, once started, to give up when they are asked to revise papers. This is partly due to a lack of understanding of the process and partly to a lack of confidence in your ability to meet this new challenge, often without any training or support, and also partly to fears that may go back to your early education:

Throughout my twenty years of teaching at a number of universities I have witnessed the terror and anguish many students feel about writing. Many acknowledge that their hatred and fear of writing surfaced in grade school and gathered momentum through high school, reaching a paralyzing peak in the college years.

(hooks 1999: 169)

Submitting a paper to an academic journal can leave you feeling precarious, but that is not just because you are weak and inexperienced; it is the very nature of the writing act, some would argue, and it is embedded in your experience of writing at various stages in your life up to this point.

**Procrastination**

Putting off writing until you have ‘more time’? Until you feel ‘ready to write’? Convinced that if you had more time you would write more?

Tasks that have deadlines get done before those that do not. You already know that a deadline forces you to prioritize. Anything with a deadline is automatically more important than something that has not.

For some academics, teaching is always a priority. Marking examinations unavoidably consumes large periods of time at certain points in the academic year. For other professionals, caring for patients will be a priority. Writing is last in a long list of tasks and, as long as it has no fixed deadline, the first to be
dropped. Even when you do give writing a time slot in your diary, it is very
difficult to protect it. For some, it proves impossible.

There are, therefore, very good reasons for putting writing off, as other prior-
ities arise. It may even feel quite subversive to be thinking about ways to lever
writing into your timetable. Do you need to ask anyone’s permission to do so?
Who else will you tell? Who will support you as you do this? Who will under-
mine you? Is it simply easier to procrastinate, rather than risking the hostility
of colleagues?

Some people will respect your efforts to stop procrastinating. How can you
recruit their support and make sure you can access it to keep you going?

Those who write for a living can point to antidotes to guilt, fear and anxiety.
They know what to do to keep writing. However, it is only by using such
strategies that we can find ease, enjoyment and creativity in writing. You have
to find your own antidotes and persevere when even those fail you:

You need perseverance, courage, bloody-mindedness, a capacity for hard
work, endurance . . .

(Weldon, quoted in Roberts et al. 2002: 7)

The writing self

Academic writing is not neutral. It is gendered, raced, classed and, therefore,
potentially discriminatory in many ways. These factors affect the role and
status of the writer in academia and will impact on the new writer’s learning
needs in relation to academic writing. The community of academic writers is
diverse, though the community of editors and reviewers may be less so. Some
will see these issues as irrelevant to the development of the writing self; others
will see the writing self as positioned by the organization of other writers and
the position of publishing in their disciplines. For them, the whole enterprise
may seem so fixed as to give the illusion of transparency, particularly to those
who are already publishing in journals. Where does the new writer fit into
all this?

Do you really need to let yourself be pinned down? There are ways of finding
room for yourself in academic journals. For example, an interesting strategy is
noted by Blaxter et al. (1998a: 146): ‘You can, of course, use a number of differ-
ent styles and voices. You might also use different names, as some academics
do, for different kinds of writing.’ While some will find this a bit extreme – and
limiting to their developing profile – others will see that perhaps they have
more options than the exclusivity of certain journals suggests.

However you choose to deal with the selectivity that operates in journals
across the fields, it might help to think of yourself as a writer and to think
through what that might mean in terms of your sense of yourself:
WHY WRITE FOR ACADEMIC JOURNALS?

1 Have a reason to write that is not just about meeting other people’s standards.
2 Make writing meaningful for yourself.
3 Reward yourself for making sacrifices for writing.
4 Take care of yourself, as a writer: physically, mentally, spiritually.
5 Find someone with whom you can have an ‘open narrative’ discussion about your writing, not just analysing barriers, but ranging over possibilities and experiences.

Many writers’ experiences and perceptions of academic writing are of fierce competition. The sheer numbers of us trying to get published means that there is, in fact, literal competition to get into journals. But this need not be your motivation to write. Some people are simply not motivated by competition; they find it demotivating. If you expected collegiality in higher education, you may be disappointed. But there is no need to endure competition until you retire. This is not to say that opting out of the ‘struggle’ to publish is your best option – though it is certainly one option – but that you have to find some way of either ignoring other people’s sense of the on-going competition or find other reasons to write, some of which you might just keep to yourself, if you feel they would put you at risk in your context.

**Team and collaborative writing**

This is a good way of not ‘going it alone’, or, as one new writer put it, ‘We can begin to run in packs’, and you may also be bringing some collaboration into this world of competition, with all the advantages – if you manage it well – of pooling strengths, skills and contacts. It might help, if you are just starting to write, to have someone who can help you make writing decisions, help you with writing dilemmas or who will simply listen.

You may be able to work and write with, and learn from, more experienced colleagues. You may be able to step outside your territory or tribe. There may be issues of voice, ownership, career implications, politics and time that you should discuss at the earliest opportunity.

However, there may also be disadvantages for new writers, and over the longer term this should not be your sole strategy: ‘Those without sole publications are not rewarded for their team-playing skills’ (Blaxter et al. 1998a: 144).
Barriers to writing

The greatest problem I can see for academics in post is not finding the motivation to write but the time amidst all the pressure and heavy workloads of teaching and administration.

(Anonymous reviewer)

This reviewer is right: time is definitely, absolutely and across all the disciplines the inhibiting factor for academic writers. This is evidenced in evaluations, focus groups, questionnaires and informal discussions where academic writers cited lack of time as the barrier they had not been able to overcome.

As the reviewer points out, even those who say that they have the ‘motivation’ to write cannot do so if the time does not exist in which to do it, or if they are so exhausted from other work that they have no energy left for writing. This suggests that even if you succeed in motivating yourself and are ready to write, you still have this problem to solve: finding time for writing and, even when you do find time, protecting it from other demands on your diary.

But are ‘motivation’ and our use of ‘time’ as separate as the reviewer makes out? Is your use of time not driven by your motivation? Do you not allocate your time to tasks that you decide to perform, knowing how much is needed for each task? Or is this too simplistic? Are you really free to decide how to spend your time, when there are so many external demands that simply must be met?

In theory, you know that you are the one who decides how much – or how little – time to spend on each of your professional tasks. In practice, however, there are so many interruptions that academics report that they rarely even get through their ‘to do’ lists. Moreover, there are priorities that cannot be deferred: when there is marking to be done, or when the department is visited by the auditors, inspectors, examiners or some other important body, we simply have to drop everything else and catch up with it in the evening or over the weekend or both.

This is the reality of many academics’ lives. Can any amount of talk about your ‘motivation’ really make a difference in this context? In order to answer that question you have to go back to your motivation: obvious as it is, it has to be said that if you are genuinely – positively – motivated to write, then you will find a way to do so. If you are not, then you won’t.

A key barrier, therefore, may be holding on to the idea that you have tried, really tried, to make time for writing and it simply does not work. I am not trying to make light of this predicament; there are many, many people who are at this point, but there are also those who have managed somehow to get beyond it. I do not in any way want to make light of what is a difficult journey – from not writing to regular publication. In fact, I would argue that there are some situations where the barriers are, in fact, insurmountable: anyone with a family and/or others to care for, anyone going through a break-up or a
bereavement, or anyone who is ill should, in my view, let themselves off the
hook for a while. Having said that, some people would find such a new chal-
lenge gave them just what they needed to take them out of themselves, to look
beyond their situations and to move forward in their lives. It is a very personal
matter. They may also judge – rightly or wrongly for their own wellbeing – that
it is too risky for their careers to take time out.

Whatever your situation, the purpose of this chapter is not to analyse
reasons for not writing – though that can be very instructive – but to progress
the discussion of ways of solving the problem of finding time to write, even
when it seems almost impossible.

If you are in the position of not being able to find time to write, it is time to
face up to the need for change. You may need to cast off some of the writing
strategies you currently use – they aren’t working. There are other ways to
write that take up less time, use up less energy and reduce the need for endless,
demotivating revisions.

**An integrative strategy**

Writing can be integrative in the sense that it is related to other academic roles,
and you can find many types of outlet for the types of writing that you could
develop from your different roles: ‘biographical, confessional or develop-
mental’ (Blaxter et al. 1998a: 139).

Writing can be integrative in another sense: it is one of the themes of this
book that new writers can – and should – work on more than one dimension of
writing. Rather than using just one of the strategies proposed in this book, or
sticking with the one that you have, this book encourages you to move
towards an integrative strategy, combining several different strategies.

For example, you can get words down on paper and then work on them
later, filling in the blanks, making improvements. Or you can structure your
paper in detail before you start writing. Either way, you can start a project –
without procrastinating – and make progress.

The strategy you use may depend on the time you have available, the type of
writing you have to do or your familiarity with the subject. You can choose the
strategy that suits the stage of writing you are at, at any one time. You can adapt
as you go along. In other words, having a range of strategies – rather than just
one – can help you to write through the various challenges that writing presents.

Having said all that, it would not do to give the impression that writing is
forever integrated and ‘flows’ once you have mastered these strategies; there is
no way round the ‘interruptedness’ of writing, nor is this a state unique to
writing, of course. Continuous flow of writing may not be an achievable goal;
what you can do is adapt and adopt strategies that will help you connect the
various stages of writing among the diverse activities of your life.
Checklist

- Consider writing about your current work; don’t wait until you have new ‘research’.
- Find personal reasons to write, reasons that matter to you.
- Don’t let your views on published papers stop you writing.
- Combine different writing strategies.
- Consider changing your current writing habits.