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Writing in the Humanities: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

Writing is the most important tool of academic communication. It is the medium we need to write dissertations, conference presentations, book chapters, and journal articles, to mention but a few. All these activities attest that writing is central to the academic and professional development of faculty members. However, research findings reveal that it abounds life-long doubts, false starts, frustrations, procrastinations and the feeling that we are not yet ready to write. In this connection, the purpose of this paper is four-fold: to highlight the writing challenges in the humanities; to give insight into the scholarly writing conventions in the humanities; to unfold the methodological decisions made by researchers in the humanities; and to assess the reliability of scientific evidence in the humanities.

Key words: writing, disciplines, humanities, science, argument, construction, academics

1. Introduction

Writing is the most important tool of academic communication. It is the medium we need to write graduate dissertations, conference presentations, book chapters and journal articles, to mention but a few. All these activities attest that writing is central to our academic and professional development. Despite its centrality to the academic and professional development of academics, experience would inform that writing involves life-long doubts, false starts, frustrations, procrastinations and the feeling that we are not yet ready to write. Indeed, every time we sit down to draft a manuscript we experience these challenges that few of us could overcome.

Despite being a Professor of history, my extended experience with academic administration at the University of Khartoum placed me in a unique position to explore the academic writing challenges among both postgraduate students and faculty members. Over the last few decades, I have served as served as an editorial board member of the Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Vice-Dean of the Graduate College, and an abstract editor for postgraduate dissertations, to mention but a few. All these responsibilities relate directly to challenges experienced by researchers and postgraduate students in their attempts to adhere to the generic and discipline-specific writing conventions. More specifically, the multiple rejections of manuscripts submitted for publication, the critical reports presented in assessment of (poor) theses, uninformative assessment reports written by some thesis assessors attest to the stakeholders' writing dilemma at the University of Khartoum.

These challenges are attributed in part to the fact most researchers received their undergraduate training through the medium of Arabic. Although they studied English as a university requirement, the relevant courses were not specifically addressed to their future need for English for academic purposes (EAP). Also, in many cases postgraduate research supervision was assigned to professors who were struggling writers themselves (cf. Boice, 199). Such supervisors have poor publication record; thus, they could not be expected to have acquired sufficient EAP skills to share with their supervisees. This fact, coupled with the lack of systematic training of faculty members and postgraduate students in the writing conventions of their disciplines, have further aggravated the situation.

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However,   a series of serious efforts have recently been made to overcome these writing challenges. For instance, the Advanced Training Centre has developed an EAP   programme to train young scholars in disciplinary writing conventions. Also, the English Language Institute started a similar programme to serve academic staff of all Sudanese Universities.

This paper is an attempt to contribute to the ongoing conversation about academic writing challenges among novice scholars and postgraduate students along with best practices to enculturate them into the writing conventions of their disciplines. The prime objective of the research is   to explore both generic and discipline-specific writing conventions and propose the best ways to present them in training packages to enhance composing skills of the stakeholders. In this connection, the paper poses the following questions:

  i.   What are the defining features of academic writing conventions across disciplines?
  ii. What are the possible challenges that stakeholders experience in engaging with academic writing conventions?
  iii. What are the best instructional practices to enculturate academics into the writing conventions of their disciplines?

2. Academic writing conventions across disciplines

Ezza et al (2020) report that academics across disciplines attach heightened significance to writing owing to the vital role that it plays in their professional and academic development. They need writing not only to move up the career ladder but also to produce, share and affect knowledge production among their peers. Also, the faculty members are conceived to write for personal reasons in such a way that they "construct themselves as academics, build professional visibility and establish reputation…" (Hyland, 2011, p. 60). It is natural, therefore, that writing forms the great part of what academics do in their institutions. In other words, they write reviews, articles, book chapters and conference presentations (Hyland, 2004; Carter, 2007). Laboratories in science departments are conceived to devote "more energy to producing papers than to making discoveries," and that scientists spend more time "in discussing and preparing articles for publication." (Hyland, 2004, p. 3). Writing is also a major indicator of the effectiveness of teaching and learning in sciences humanities. Careful examination of learning outcomes of zoology and psychology showed that the evidence of learning in both programmes involved ability to write lab reports, scientific papers, literature review, critical analyses, and summaries, among others (Carter, 2007). Despite the centrality of writing to our academic and professional development, it is generally conceived to be defined by struggle (Badenhorst et al, 2012, p. 64). This struggle is attributable in part to the fact that academic writing combines a variety of generic and disciplinary conventions that writers should master to function as members of their respective disciplinary communities. The generic conventions include a number of considerations that give rise to academic writing and enable researchers to position themselves as members their respective discourse communities. (Swales & Feak, 2012).

In addition to the characteristics listed in the table below , Braxton (1995), as cited in Nesi& Gardner (2006, p. 99), explains that hard disciplines are more concerned with the development of career and cognitive goals. By contrast, soft disciplines tend to develop education, character, "critical thinking and scholarly activities." Also, Coffin et al (2003) draw a methodological distinction between hard and soft sciences. In other words, while knowledge production in hard sciences involves quantification and experimentation procedures, acceptance of new knowledge in soft sciences depends on how well it is argued.

Parry (1998, p. 275) illustrates the difference between hard and soft sciences by comparing physics, and history and sociology. Based on the process of knowledge accumulation, physics could be said to be atomistic in the sense that "each new piece of the jigsaw has to be identified and fitted in what is already there." By contrast, knowledge production in history and sociology is "based on criticism, reiteration and interpretation", which renders it "holistic

and organic, growing in a complex and comparatively unpredictable way." Thus, the jigsaw metaphor of physics does not apply to it.

However, the disciplines are not always sharply dichotomized as Becher &Trowler's model would indicate. There are instances of crossover between hard/soft and pure/applied divides (Neumann et al (2002), as cited in Nesi and Gardner (2006). This is evidenced by such modular courses as clinical psychology, physical geography, speech pathology, econometrics, and computational linguistics, to mention but a few. The available literature draws extensive comparisons between the writing conventions of hard and soft sciences based on their scientific characteristics as reported in table (1) above. On the one hand, the concrete, impersonal, and value-free nature of hard sciences requires a language that describes material objects (Parry, 1998). Also, since hard sciences require experimental proof as the only basis to accept new knowledge, they use a rigid writing format that starts by establishing a gap in the existing literature and then providing experimental data to bridge it, following the standard move system of Introduction-Methods-Results-Conclusion (IMRD) devised by Hyland (2004). By contrast, the individualistic and interpretive nature of soft sciences draws on the strength of their arguments to persuade their respective disciplinary communities of the new knowledge claims.

Classification of disciplines

Group	Subgroup	Example	Characteristics
Hard	Pure	physics, biology, mathematics	Cumulative, atomistic, impersonal, values-free, verificatory, etc.
	Applied	engineering, medicine, technology	Purposive, pragmatic, concerned with mastery of physical environment.
Soft	Pure	history, anthropology, politics	Reiterative, holistic, personal, value-laden, dispute over knowledge verification
	Applied	Education, management, law	Functional, utilitarian, concerned with enhancement of professional practice.

Source: Ezza et al, (2020).

3. Tips for Writing Quality in the humanities

Humanities is a collection of academic disciplines that includes philosophy, history, languages, literatures, to mention but a few. The humanities concern themselves with the construction and deconstruction of meaning. They centre upon the interpretation of both hard evidence and texts as evidenced by archaeological investigations and literary analyses respectively. In most cases, the humanities use methods that are primarily critical, or speculative, and have a

significant historical perspective. According to USC Libraries, humanities do not use the same methodology. For example, History uses the historical method; philosophy uses conceptual analysis, and literature uses criticism.

According to Bazerman (2010), in order to answer research questions, fields, e.g., criticism, archeology, geology, and history rely on the remaining traces of past events. Sometimes solid remnants like fossils or pieces of rock reveal the past; and sometimes we must look at events through someone's account. Accounts of people who witnessed the original events (e.g., private journals as well as newspaper reports), documents instrumental to the unfolding of events (e.g., correspondence between two leaders negotiating a pact), or other written records (e.g., old bills found in a desk or the registration of a business contract) may be supplemented by nonverbal objects (e.g., archeological remains of a battlefield), but historians inevitably depend on the written record prepared by others. In using such written records, historians must constantly consider the meaning, interpretation, reliability, purpose, and bias of the primary documents and the secondary literature.

The humanities, Bazerman maintains, have long memories. In other words, the creative works of the past continue to be of current interest, even though we may no longer produce works like them or agree with ideas presented in them. For example, students of architecture try to understand buildings of the past; students of literature study literary texts; students of philosophy study the great philosophic texts of the past even though some of these texts may no longer be considered to be correct or true. Interpretation helps us appreciate what others have accomplished; it also helps us create new works by seeing how older works convey their meaning.

It was reported in (2) above the scientific characteristics of disciplines determine the way they write. In this connection, writing in history is a case in point. It was shown above that historians must rely on the fragmentary records that survive from the time period under study, which necessarily reveal just part of the story. Therefore, "the guiding principles behind all historical writing must be *selection* and *interpretation*: the thoughtful selection of topics and questions that seem most interesting, and the responsible interpretation of sources in order to construct meaningful arguments." (Wewers, 2007, p.1). Owing to the multiplicity of scientific activities, history writing Come in all shapes and sizes. That is,   papers are narrative, analytical, historiographical, cultural, and political. These types of history Papers naturally require different amounts of research, analysis, and interpretation (ibid).

4. Conclusion

This paper was intended to highlight both writing challenges and rewards for academics in the humanities. In an attempt to unfold the academic writing challenges, the paper started by defining the scientific characteristics of disciplines subsumed under humanities as the way disciplines write is central the way they write. A number of tips were proposed to inform scholarly conventions in the humanities.

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