

Promoting Professional Development through Academic Writing

Mark Connolly, Asia University

INTRODUCTION

Conducting and publishing academic research about teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is an activity that benefits not only the teaching institution and students, but also can help teachers to advance their careers. Anyone with a PhD has already passed the rigors of strict academic writing and satisfied the guardians of those standards in order to complete their dissertation. In Japan, university EFL teachers such as myself are usually hired with a minimum of a master's degree. Unlike PhD's, we haven't all had to publish academic writing. To move up the career ladder though, we are usually required by prospective employers to have a minimum of three academic publications on our resume. Luckily, many Japanese universities have in-house journals, which are a great place to start academic writing for publication.

The following anecdotal article describes my experiences learning about EFL academic research and writing through my work at a Japanese university and how I assisted my colleagues with their professional development through organizing and promoting academic writing opportunities. I hope this account provides direction for others to do the same, as teachers, writers and editors.

BACKGROUND NARRATIVE

In my first year teaching EFL at the university level in Japan, I learned that I could advance my career only by accumulating a number of publications in the field. I wanted this career. I had no such publications. The task seemed highfalutin and daunting. Nevertheless, I had a few things going for me. I had a background in journalism and creative writing. My master's degree program in the social sciences had emphasized research and academic writing. Lastly, my EFL department at Asia University had its own in-house academic journal in which faculty members could publish every year.

In that first year, I joined the department's editorial committee, helped to edit the in-house journal, and published my first humble article of original academic research. Also during that year, some of my colleagues shared with me that they lacked experience with academic writing for publication or were anxious about undertaking it. Our journal had been suffering years of declining submissions, and it seemed to me that these concerns of my colleagues were some possible reasons why. I asked them if they'd be interested in a writers'

support group. Several said they would, and so that first year we had a couple of informal meetings to offer advice and encouragement to one another with our academic writing.

The next year I had the opportunity to become editor-in-chief of the journal and I jumped at it. I decided to use my position as editor to further help the teachers in my department and to learn more for myself about academic writing.

TWO PLANS

To help my colleagues and myself learn more about academic writing, I devised two plans. First, I used my annual departmental project to create and implement the Academic Writing Project, in which I researched about academic writing and came up with six basic steps that anyone could follow to plan and write an academic article. These are the six steps:

- Research Question or Thesis Statement
- References
- Abstract
- Completed Draft
- Rewritten Draft and
- Final Draft.

Next, in my position as editor-in-chief, I created the Guaranteed Publication Program. Under this program, the six steps listed above were used sequentially as six deadlines for submission to the journal. My colleagues could submit materials to meet any of the deadlines and receive prompt, critical feedback on their work from the three members of the journal's editorial committee. Under the Guaranteed Publication Program, however, all authors were guaranteed to have their articles published in the journal if they followed the six-step plan and met all six deadlines with quality writing. The guarantee worked both ways: The authors were guaranteed publication, and the editorial committee was guaranteed to have final drafts that were well organized and well written after completing all six steps.

THE SIX STEPS

The books and resources I consulted in my research suggested that these were a reasonable progression of steps to follow in the research and writing processes (Lester, 1999 and Nunan, 1997). I adopted them into the six steps/deadlines, described below in more detail. I think anyone who is beginning to learn about academic writing for publication could adapt them to their own requirements.

Because ours is an annual journal, published in February, I created the deadline schedule for one academic year. In Japan, the year runs April to March. I set the first three

deadlines in spring term, one each in May, June and July. The last three were in fall term, two in October and one in November.

Before each deadline, I suggested reference materials to read for meeting that particular deadline. For the first three deadlines, I also held help sessions on the topics. In these sessions I acted only as facilitator, introducing the topic and then guiding the discussion. As it turned out, nearly everyone who attended the sessions had something to contribute, so we all helped each other.

Let me explain and state the goal for each of the steps I have suggested.

1. Research Question or Thesis Statement

It's important early on to be able to write your topic in one succinct thesis statement. It can also be written in the form of a basic question that your research is trying to answer. This helps you to narrow down and define your research topic.

The professor who headed my master's degree program said research begins with "a kind of uneasiness." I remember she said that, when reading in your academic field, you should keep track of ideas or questions that trouble you, that seem incomplete, that produce a feeling of uneasiness, as if something hasn't been explained fully or satisfactorily for you. These gaps in academic theory or practice are opportunities for budding researchers to explore. Take that uneasiness and think about it. Write notes on it. When you've written out your ideas, turn them into one succinct research question or thesis statement to describe what you will research and write about.

2. References

Part of exploring an academic topic through research is finding out what other researchers before you have written about it. For this, you need to read and learn about your topic. Go to the Internet or library, find sources on your topic and read all about it. From these sources, take notes on the chapters or articles that are relevant to your research. Create an annotated bibliography or a reference page.

For the Guaranteed Publication Program that I conducted, prospective authors had to compile a list of references on their topic and hand it in to meet the second deadline. Knowing your sources at this point in the research and writing process is important, because it helps you to locate your particular research niche in the broader field.

You can follow any professional style guide to format your reference page. The journal I worked on uses the Fourth Edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (1998). Check the guidelines for the publication to which you plan to submit.

3. Abstract and Working Title

An abstract is a summary of your research. The purpose of the abstract we solicited is different from that found at the beginning of articles in many academic journals, which is written after the paper is completed, and allows the readers to quickly see what the article is about.

The abstract solicited for the third deadline under the Guaranteed Publication Program was simply a one-paragraph summary of the intended research topic and included a sentence or two about how the research was to be conducted. The goal of requiring authors to submit an abstract at this point is that it demands that the researcher know their topic well enough to be able to summarize it in a paragraph, and also demands that they know how they will research their topic.

Between this deadline and deadline four, or earlier, some actual research needs to be conducted. This professional development article doesn't include a discussion of how to conduct research. Lester (1999) and Nunan (1997), mentioned above, describe research methods. Please consult those books or others.

Research, like academic writing for publication, need not be intimidating to the beginner. For my first two academic articles, for example, I simply surveyed and/or interviewed my departmental colleagues about aspects of our work in EFL. I conducted this research at the end of spring term so that I had material to analyze and write about during summer vacation. After conducting research, it's back to writing.

Writing is rewriting. Any good writing teacher or how-to book on writing will drum this into your head. The books mentioned above recommend thorough rewriting, and other writing books further reinforce this discipline (Strunk and White, 2000; Elbow, 1981; Gillespie, et al., 1989). Writing is a skill that is developed by learning how to write, to then critically read what you have written (from the readers' point of view), and finally to rewrite. Good writers repeat this cycle, not necessarily with the goal of perfection, but to make the writing clear and well organized.

With this in mind, the Guaranteed Publication Program included three draft deadlines. Our first draft was due early in fall term, not long after arriving back at work from summer

vacation. The editorial committee had highly recommended that all authors write a detailed outline and rough draft of their articles during the vacation.

4. Completed Draft

The first draft submitted had to be a completed draft. That is, all sections of the research had to be finished and written about. At that point, peer editors in the department read the draft and gave feedback to the author about what worked well in the writing and what didn't work. The peer editors critically read for clarity of writing and overall organization of the article. Clarity of writing and good organization were the minimum standards that we tried to uphold as an editorial committee, at this stage and throughout the submission process.

5. Rewritten Drafts

After peer editor feedback, authors submitted rewritten articles to the editorial committee for our reading and feedback. Again, we looked for the basic standards of clarity of writing and orderly presentation of material. Because the committee accepted or rejected articles for publication at the final deadline, and because we guaranteed articles publication if they met all six deadlines with quality work, we needed a chance to critically read all articles and give feedback based on the standards of quality writing we wanted to uphold. The committee carefully read each article, made consensus decisions about quality, and offered detailed feedback to the authors.

6. Final Draft

At the final deadline, final drafts of articles were accepted for publication or tactfully rejected with suggestions for rewriting and encouragement for submitting to a subsequent year's journal or to another publication. Decisions were the consensus of the committee and based on standards of quality writing we had made explicit throughout the year.

CONCLUSION

All articles that met all six deadlines were published. Because of the step-by-step, multiple-draft process, the articles that came in at the final deadline were of high quality and needed only minor editing before publication. The Guaranteed Publication Program and the Academic Writing Project had accomplished two main goals. The journal published nearly double the number of articles from the previous year and thus reversed a trend toward a declining number of submissions. Also, we created a schedule that gave our colleagues some

basic advice and help in organizing their research and completing their academic writing in a timely manner. Many writers expressed gratitude for the deadlines and help sessions.

I benefited from this work in several areas of my own professional life: I have gained confidence to research, write and publish; I have advanced my career through publishing articles; and I have discovered areas of research that interest me enough to pursue further.

This work was done in a large EFL department where there is an emphasis on cooperation and professional development among colleagues. I hope that, regardless of their working environment or previous experience with research and writing, interested EFL teachers can adapt some of the advice and experience presented in this article to advance their own professional development, careers and fields of interest.

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