What is Good Academic Writing?

Insights into Discipline-Specific Student Writing

Edited by
Melinda Whong
Jeanne Godfrey

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New Perspectives for English for Academic Purposes

Series editors: Alex Ding, Ian Bruce and Melinda Whong

This series sets the agenda for studies in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) by opening up research and scholarship to new domains, ideas and perspectives as well as giving a platform to emerging and established practitioners and researchers in the field.

The volumes in this series are innovative in that they broaden the scope of theoretical and practical interests in EAP by focusing on neglected or new areas of interest, to provide the EAP community with a deeper understanding of some of the key issues in teaching EAP across the world and in diverse contexts.

Forthcoming in the series
Pedagogies in English for Academic Purposes,
edited by Carole MacDiarmid and Jennifer MacDonald

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Foreword

Alex Ding, Ian Bruce and Melinda Whong, Series Editors

What Is Good Academic Writing: Insights into Discipline-Specific Student Writing is the first volume to be published in this series. In this foreword we would like, firstly, to briefly discuss some of the reasons for launching New Perspectives for English for Academic Purposes and then to locate how this volume fulfils the objectives we set for this series.

English for academic purposes (EAP) as a practice and discipline has developed significantly since its modest beginnings in the 1970s and we now have a full-fledged discipline with an ever-increasing body of research, publications, journals, associations, conferences and events. We know a great deal more now about the contexts and texts of EAP, using an array of established theories (genre theory, systemic functional linguistics, critical EAP and academic literacies) employing an ever more sophisticated range of methods and methodologies. However, there has been considerably less attention focused on other key areas and aspects of EAP, aspects such as (but not exclusively) the agency and identity of the practitioner, EAP pedagogies and the socio-economic contexts within which EAP occurs. This uneven development renders the knowledge-base of EAP somewhat unbalanced and partial, and a fuller, richer practitioner knowledge-base remains to be built.

The rationale for this series is to begin to redress this imbalance and begin to build to a richer knowledge-base by exploring aspects of EAP that we believe to be essential to EAP and essential to those researching and teaching in EAP but which, until now, have remained occulted, marginal or ignored. It's all too easy to assume that existing frameworks are the only frameworks when, in fact, there is no reason why other areas might not yield potentially useful insights, if explored more formally. The purpose of this series is to redefine and reorient EAP research and scholarship: to become the locus of cutting-edge EAP research in the coming years. This is why the three of us decided to launch this series.

What Is Good Academic Writing: Insights into Discipline-Specific Student Writing is the first volume to be published in this series, and we believe that this volume exemplifies many of the ambitions we hold for it. The chapters in

this volume represent a local (University of Leeds) and collective endeavour by practitioners and content lecturers to understand better what is meant by 'good' student writing. This may seem a well-trodden path in EAP and this is perhaps partially true. However, this volume is significantly different in two important ways. Firstly, the questions, methods and approaches adopted by the authors reflect their concerns and interests in not only understanding student writing but importantly the motivation of all authors to improve and develop student education. The purpose of these authors is profoundly driven by concerns for the students they teach. It is the orientation of their work that is distinctive and this orientation is clear from the questions they ask and answer (which may or may not be the same questions and motivations of the EAP research community). Secondly, these projects and the subsequent writing up were undertaken alongside all their other professional activities, with only a small amount of time allocated to these projects. This is a positive example of what practitioners can individually and collectively contribute to knowledge with time and, most importantly, collegial support. We like to hope that this volume will inspire other universities and other language centres to believe that significant contributions to the EAP knowledge base can be achieved with adequate support and resources. Failure to support practitioners in their scholarship endeavours should be seen as an abdication of professionalism and limiting the knowledge that can usefully serve students and practitioners.

On a final note, we write this foreword in the midst of a global pandemic, and the outcome of this for EAP as a profession and for practitioners is unknown. What we can say is that EAP will undergo profound changes as a result, and we would hope that this volume contributes as a reminder of the values and value of EAP to the university community: to better understand students and practitioners and both their academic and educational needs, and to contribute to sharing our knowledge with them and our colleagues.

Introduction: The Good Writing Project

Melinda Whong and Jeanne Godfrey

This project is very much a product of time and place, in three different ways. To begin with, it reflects a trend within the academic discipline of English for academic purposes (EAP) towards a more discipline-specific orientation. As is desirable when there are developments in academic thinking, this trend has had a positive impact within institutional contexts. This is the second way in which this project is of its time and place, as it explores developments at one specific university in the north of England which took the ambitious step of moving all of its EAP provision to a discipline-specific orientation. While well grounded theoretically, revising the entirety of a curriculum was an ambitious endeavour, especially for a university as large as the comprehensive Russell Group institution in question. The concomitant requirement that all EAP practitioners would be expected, practically overnight, to deliver English for Specific Academic Purposes instead of English for General Academic Purposes provided a context in which there was much discussion and debate, and a strong need to work collaboratively both amongst EAP practitioners and with subject specialists. It is this context that brings us to the third feature which makes this project timely: the nature of EAP as a profession. To a large degree, casualization is still an unfortunate feature of an EAP career, especially at universities in English-speaking countries which rely heavily on international students for revenue. However, as EAP provision becomes recognized as valuable throughout a student's degree, more EAP practitioners are needed to provide EAP courses year-round. Year-round teaching means more stable full-time posts and even acceptance as members of the academic faculty – all of which leads to improvements for EAP as a profession. This level of development affords the opportunity for an environment in which EAP professionals can begin to work to their potential in terms of scholarly contribution within the

academy. What is reported in this edited volume is a result of what is possible when a group of capable and committed practitioners are given a modest amount of support. What started out as a discussion amongst a small set of EAP practitioners evolved into what we hope will soon be much more the norm within EAP: a scholarship project about teaching and learning, for the benefit of student education which was conceived of, led and shaped by EAP practitioners in collaboration with subject specialists.

The idea for the 'Good Writing' project came about from a discussion which took place during a routine exercise of standardization amongst a group of EAP specialists with years of experience in teaching academic writing. What began as disagreement about what constituted good writing led to recognition of a gap of knowledge at a specific level in terms of what constitutes good writing in one discipline as opposed to another. It seemed to be a case of recognizing that the more you know, the more you realize just how much you don't know. For some time now, as the field of EAP has moved in the direction of discipline-specific specialism, EAP practitioners have needed to develop knowledge of practices, norms and expectations at the discipline-specific level. Yet development of such knowledge poses a challenge given the structural reality that EAP centres typically sit alongside academic disciplines. Conditions could hardly be more favourable than those within the institution which hosted this project: the EAP unit is respected as an academic unit, and an institution-wide approach of collaboration between EAP practitioner and subject specialist was brought in at university policy level. Yet as has been noted elsewhere, despite moves to embed programming within departments and access to discipline-specific practices (Wingate 2018), insider knowledge remains a challenge. A second motivation for this project was a desire to provide opportunity for EAP practitioners to exercise scholarly ambition. The reality is that many specialist teachers of EAP writing do not have the opportunity to engage in academic writing themselves. Taken together, these factors inspired the original idea for a project that would bring EAP and subject specialists together to explore what 'good writing' is at the subject level.

Participants in the project were identified based on a Call for Papers, sent out across the university. The initial plan was to match subject specialists with EAP specialists, forming pairs who would each co-author a chapter of an edited volume. In reality, it was naïve to think that academics who didn't know each other would be able to be paired up to conduct research. Instead, the volume includes some chapters authored by subject discipline specialists and some by EAP specialists. The shared motivation amongst all of the authors was a desire to

develop better understanding of writing at the discipline level in order to be able to better articulate to students how to become successful writers themselves.

In order to ensure a level of coherence throughout the volume, a few parameters were established for each sub-project to adhere to. Each chapter was required to include analysis of student texts, with the suggestion of a focus at the level of postgraduate writing. In addition to contributing to a level of coherence, the thinking was that postgraduate level work would better exemplify discipline-specific differences than lower academic–level writing, which was assumed to embody more general academic features. Authors were also encouraged to explore the understanding of 'good writing' by lecturers in the discipline, based on the recognition that these are the people who ultimately differentiate between good and less-than-good writing when they mark their students' work.

The project from the beginning was conceived of as one of scholarship in the sense of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (Fanghanel et al. 2015). In other words the research was devised wholly in the service of student education. As such, it required a level of commitment from each of the contributors which was to some degree 'above and beyond' required expectations. For the EAP practitioner contributors, a very modest amount of remit from teaching was given to allow time for the project. For the subject specialists, efforts had to come from time they would have otherwise given to research within their field. It remains to be seen whether the work done here would qualify as 'research' for the subject specialists. Indeed, it is hoped that one day, projects like this may no longer be seen as marginal activity within academia (Ding and Bruce 2017), but instead be fully respected and formally sanctioned.

While each chapter reports on a project conducted independently, regular communication with the Good Writing project contributors helped to ensure a level of coherence, and sought to provide any needed support. Contributors were invited to meet over 'working lunches' every six weeks or so, to compare notes and seek advice. This was also a place to identify areas where authors felt they could benefit from some specific training. We would like to thank Nigel Harwood for workshops that he generously delivered in support of the project, and Alex Ding for mentoring a number of the authors at the individual level. Working as a team of authors proved useful, especially for navigating the challenges of gaining access to appropriate examples of student writing and to securing permission for the use of student texts in a way that abided by ethical codes of practice. Regular communication also allowed us to debate some of the particulars of the project. In discussing the need for anonymity of student

authors, for example, we quickly realized that it would be impossible to disguise the specific institution where this project was conducted, given that author information within this volume itself reveals institutional affiliation. Despite this, we agreed collectively to not name our institution, or to use specific department labels, because our findings and conclusions go beyond the local context. We also debated use of terminology. Because the points being made are not specific to the local context, efforts have been made to avoid institutional and/or national labels and practices, such as the choice of the word 'module' instead of 'course'. Where local or national practices are referred to, attempts have been made to define and/or clarify in order to ensure understanding. Other debates about terminology held wider significance. Whether to use the label of 'subject' or 'content' specialist, for example, is fraught with controversy. While trying to preserve a level of coherence, more often than not, we opted to allow each author to choose what seemed most appropriate within their specific project and the context of their particular discipline.

Another way in which coherence was achieved across projects was to require from the start a degree of coherence in terms of data and research method. Each of the chapters in this volume includes analysis of student texts; most also include considerations of the views of subject specialists who act as markers of student writing, thereby unwittingly defining what makes student writing 'good'. Each chapter is summarized below.

'A collaborative scholarship model of EAP research and practice' by Jeanne Godfrey and Melinda Whong

This first chapter of the volume situates the others by providing a general review of the EAP literature and mapping out the context in which the subsequent scholarship projects are situated. It also outlines pedagogic contexts and research frameworks that have informed research into student academic writing in the EAP field, particularly the ESP Genre Model paradigm. After summarizing ways in which these studies have generated important EAP pedagogy, Godfrey and Whong go on to discuss areas of research which they feel could be further developed both within and beyond the genre analysis framework. Turning to the question of student writing, the authors propose four specific areas of scholarship where they feel development is needed for better understanding what constitutes successful student writing. The authors promote an approach of collaborative scholarship between EAP practitioners and core-content tutors.

Key elements of the approach include the suggestion that the research agenda should be led by EAP practitioners, with analysis, discussion, implications and pedagogic application all being a collaborative effort between themselves and their core-content colleagues. In this way, the authors suggest, progress towards a fuller understanding of what constitutes good student writing could be made, with the aim of informing not only EAP practice but also how subject specialists articulate their concepts of successful writing to themselves and to their students.

'The written discourse genres of digital media studies' by Simon Webster

This chapter investigates academic writing in a relatively new discipline that stands apart from its social science relatives. It takes as a starting point the centrality of subject specialist perspectives in determining how 'quality' in student academic writing might be defined for the discipline. The chapter then describes a genre analysis methodology in which digital media studies subject specialists identify valued characteristics of a range of student academic writing discourse genres within the discipline. These genres span five separate genre families.

The chapter reports that a diverse range of academic writing characteristics were identified by the subject specialists as representing good academic writing during the research interviews. These features, however, could be seen to be specific to the individual discourse genres analysed and a patterning of desired characteristics identified for each. Furthermore, the work suggests that the discourse genres can be broadly grouped into either those that principally adhere to the academic conventions of the social sciences or those aligned to the professional conventions of the digital industries. The implications of these main findings are explored with the aim of providing the reader with an understanding of the academic writing skills required for the discipline and how these skills relate to the discipline's specific discourse genres.

'Exploring clarity in the discipline of design' by Clare Maxwell

This chapter focuses on a largely unfathomed and yet crucial aspect of student writing, that of clarity. Clarity is widely accepted as being crucial to good writing, and yet from an EAP perspective its subjectivity and multifaceted

nature make it particularly difficult to explicate in a way that might help students enhance the clarity of their own writing. Through a small-scale exploratory study, the chapter examines the concept of clarity within the context of design. It draws on analysis of high-scoring dissertation-level assessments and interviews with subject specialists/assessors, in order to identify the different aspects of clarity considered to be key to good writing in the discipline, as well as features that are perceived to enhance or diminish written clarity. The study provides an interesting insight into subject specialists' perceptions of student writing, and what they value most highly. From this it considers the role that language plays in achieving written clarity, as perceived by those tasked with assessing students' work, in order to then consider implications for the teaching of EAP.

'Musicology and its others' by Karen Burland, Edward Venn and Scott McLaughlin

Music as a discipline is grouped within the arts and humanities, inheriting the writing practice and assumptions of that academic domain. Consequentially, good writing in music is centred on the argumentative essay and dissertation. However, since the late twentieth century there has been an increasing growth in music sub-disciplinary areas that draw on writing practices external to the arts and humanities. Thus electronic engineering, computer science, psychology, business and social sciences all offer significant source domains for music sub-disciplines commonly found across UK higher education, each bringing with them their own assumptions about good writing that intermingle with the dominant arts and humanities modality. This chapter uses semi-structured interviews to explore good writing in music from the perspectives of staff and taught postgraduate students across this range of music sub-disciplines. Discussion of the interviews centres on three areas that emerge as critical points across the sub-disciplines: criticality; developing a position, finding a voice; and teaching and learning argumentation. The interdisciplinary nature of a music degree – with students potentially studying across a range of sub-disciplines – leads to a fuzziness around writing genres that can be masked by the centrality of humanities modalities. Postgraduate study especially leans towards expectations that good writing engages with sub-disciplinary literature to enter the discourse of that community of practice.

'Good academic reflective writing in dentistry' by Marion Bowman

This chapter focuses on academic reflective writing (ARW), a new genre of student writing that is now widely used for the assessment of reflective practice in vocationally oriented higher education courses. As the author is based in a dental school, an insider's perspective of the student experience of ARW is presented. The hybrid nature of ARW is explored using high-scoring examples of two tasks from dentistry in combination with markers' insights. It is concluded that in order for student writers to successfully arrive at a transformed perspective of their clinical experiences, their writing must progress through a series of reflective levels. After selecting an appropriate case, the student writer must sketch the context, make personal links to the case, and analyse key features of the case either through reflective thinking or using literature, in order to arrive at a considered judgement with practical suggestions for future action. This complexity must be mastered within the constraints of what students feel it is permissible to say without falling foul of being judged as unprofessional against regulatory standards. In addition, the two tasks analysed here make contrasting demands on students which brings into question the notion of whether a coherent 'genre' is represented here.

'Dissertations in fine art' by Sara Montgomery

This chapter describes a small-scale study focusing on dissertations from a practice-based fine art master's (MA) course at a UK institution. The aims of the study were to gain insight into the purpose of the dissertation task, identify areas which may be challenging for the student writers and consider what are perceived to be good features of student writing according to subject specialists. The study included analysis of the task instructions as well as the assessment rubrics that were used to mark the work. The author conducted interviews with subject specialists who had contributed to marking the dissertations.

The dissertation task centres around the student writer considering their artistic practice in the context of contemporary culture and seeking inspiration, as well as aligning themselves with people undertaking similar work. Flexibility in planning is considered a good trait in construction of the dissertations; the content should remain loose enough to adapt to shifts in focus. Student writers

devise their own research questions are encouraged to allow their research to be wide-reaching, perhaps cross-disciplinary. Well-developed research skills are necessary, particularly in selection of case studies. Features of good language are in how it is constructed, presenting clear arguments and having conviction.

'Good writing in linguistics' by Diane Nelson and Valentina Brunetto

Nelson and Brunetto focus on student writing in pure (or theoretical) linguistics, a discipline which, unlike the adjacent field of applied linguistics, has featured only rarely in the EAP literature. As an interdisciplinary field with a relatively young history, linguistics provides an interesting angle from which to observe the link between academic identities and epistemologies, and what is valued as good writing in the discipline. The authors argue that the unique nature of this field – which is at once 'hard' (drawing on the scientific method) and 'soft' (because of the evolving nature of its paradigms) – shapes features of writing such as the use of authorial voice and the use of evidence to support argumentation. Their analysis of student writing in MA and outstanding undergraduate dissertations shows that 'good' student writing in linguistics contains an awareness of these disciplinary conventions. Moreover, they show how a fine-grained analysis of student writing in the different sub-disciplines of theoretical and experimental linguistics can offer insights into the relation between methodological approaches in the discipline and student writing styles.

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A Collaborative Scholarship Model of EAP Research and Practice

Jeanne Godfrey and Melinda Whong

Introduction

English for academic purposes (EAP) is a dynamic and growing field within English for specific purposes (ESP). EAP comprises two overlapping, yet distinguishable, centres of activity: pedagogy and research. There are EAP practitioners – academic professionals whose careers are primarily devoted to some form of teaching (many of whom also engage in academic scholarship to some degree), and there are also professional academics in the EAP field who engage in research while also sometimes practicing as teachers of EAP. In addition to these two overlapping profiles, there are also practitioners of the academic subjects that form the students' core course content, some of whom, for a range of reasons, find themselves teaching rhetorical conventions and associated lexico-grammatical features of English in the context of their discipline. In this chapter, we explore the potential for a collaborative approach to scholarship in which EAP and content specialists work jointly to explore academic practices.

In our exploration we focus on student academic writing. We begin by briefly setting the scene for EAP pedagogy and research respectively, before looking more closely at the relevant research on academic writing. As will become clear in our discussion, we have an orientation towards the context of UK higher education (HE) because this is where the research in this publication has been conducted. While this means use of local terminology at times, the concepts and argumentation are not bound by the UK context. Our exploration of academic writing highlights the fact that the ESP genre model is a predominant framework for EAP research and pedagogy, and our discussion of the literature leaves us arguing that while this approach is undeniably valuable, a more EAP

practitioner-led scholarship agenda holds potential not only for nuancing our current understanding of academic genres, but for developing other areas of knowledge about student writing; moreover, we argue that such scholarship should involve both EAP and core subject practitioners. The second half of this chapter proposes four areas of scholarship that would benefit from such a collaborative approach. We begin, however, by giving a brief background to EAP, looking first at pedagogy and then at relevant research frameworks.

EAP pedagogic contexts

EAP as an area of pedagogy developed from the teaching of ESP in English-medium universities in the 1960s and 1970s, chiefly in Europe, North Africa and India. UK EAP expanded rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s, partly as a result of the drive of HE institutions to increase their intake of international students. The primary objective of EAP is generally agreed to be that of assisting students in achieving communicative competency in their academic community, with the underlying premise that it is possible to teach students the linguistic and para-linguistic features needed to operate successfully in their field of study.

In their summary of the development of ESP and EAP, Dudley Evans and St. John (1998) discuss the different levels of liaison between EAP and content tutors. They define co-operation as the first stage of EAP and content practitioner liaison, whereby the academic English teacher takes the initiative in acquiring knowledge of the conceptual and textual frameworks of their students' discipline(s). The next level of liaison is collaboration, where EAP and content tutor work together both inside and outside the classroom to design and prepare tasks and perhaps also team teach. An important approach to mention in this context is what is often referred to as 'embedded'. Examples of embedded provision are discussed by Dean and O'Neill (2011) in their 'Writing in the Disciplines' case studies. The book's contributing authors describe various forms of embeddedness, for example, that of academic writing tutors contributing to the redesigning of a first-year business studies degree module (Emmanuel et al. in Dean and O'Neill 2011). Wingate and others (Wingate 2015, Wingate, Tribble, Andon and Cogo 2011) have also helped to develop work in this area, for example, by conducting studies in which EAP-oriented tasks form part of the disciplinary course content, delivered either by the English language tutor or jointly between language and content tutor. The studies conducted by Wingate et al. have been influential in the growth of embedded provision in EAP, and Wingate has also looked at the