

# Why read about writing?

by Blog Admin

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*Academics tend to focus on how best to get their outputs read, rather than on the writing process itself. **Pat Thomson** argues writing itself deserves attention. If academics embrace their writer identity, there is much to be learned about the art from wider creative resources.*



Academics are very concerned with getting the writing done and getting the stuff out there. After all, it's the out there that counts for jobs, careers, bids and for audit purposes. Writing advice therefore often focuses on how to get to the getting-it-out-there.

The problem with this approach is that we often lose sight of the writing itself. Writing is craft, certainly it's art-ful. Writing involves choosing words with care, arranging them in relation to each other in order to make sense – sense not only meaning understanding but also as provoking senses – writing can go well beyond the simply cognitive.

If we think of ourselves as writers, then we can become interested in more than simply finding out how to get the stuff out there. We can become interested in writing per se. We might also then be interested in other people's writing practices, and in reading all kinds of writing, not just the scholarly monograph and the holiday novel.

There are lots of interesting resources about writing. Some are intended for people doing creative writing courses, some are written by star authors for their readers and some are writers writing about writing just because they are interested in the subject. I've got a stack of all of these varieties – some of them are pretty germane to academic writing as well as to that which is dubbed 'creative'.

I often find myself dipping in and out of these books at odd moments – something that would be approved of by the author of one of my fave books of writing about writing – Steven King. Yes, that Steven King. The one who writes mega-selling horror stories. His book is called [On writing: a memoir of the craft](#). (2000). He tells the story of how he came to writing and he has a lot to say about what counts as good writing. Much of this is relevant to academic writers, particularly those unsure of their 'voice'.

Take his comments on vocabulary.

*One of the really bad things you can do to your writing is to dress up the vocabulary, looking for long words because you're maybe a little bit ashamed of your short ones. This is like dressing up a household pet in evening clothes. The pet is embarrassed and the person who committed this act of premeditated cuteness should be even more embarrassed. Make yourself a promise right now that you'll never use 'emolument' when you mean 'tip'.... (p 129)*

Of course the question of vocabulary is not the same for academic writers although the sense of being embarrassed about short words might be. Part of the process of working in an academic discipline is using the technical language that is particular to it. However using the right terminology with precision is not the same as using complicated multi-syllabic words when the obvious ones will do.

With this caveat, I reckon King's advice really does also apply to academic writing. I can't tell you the number of times that as a journal reviewer I've reeled away from someone who has said something pretty straightforward in the most tortured terms imaginable. King says that as you read your vocabulary improves, if you watch out for words – this is also the case with academic writing and reading. Read Steven King I want to say to those self-consciously 'clever' academic writers, and right now before you do the revisions!

Then there's the writer's companion Anne Lamott, whose text [bird by bird, some instructions on writing and life](#) (1994) is mandatory reading in many creative writing courses. It's pretty folksy stuff but very good for reminders about the kinds of issues that haunt the average writer. Here's Lamott on perfectionism.

*Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a shitty first draft. I think perfectionism is based in the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won't have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren't even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have a lot more fun doing it.*

*Besides, perfectionism will ruin your writing, blocking inventiveness and playfulness and life force (these are words we are allowed to use in California). Perfectionism means that you try desperately not to leave so much mess to clean up. But clutter and mess show us that life is being lived. Clutter is wonderfully fertile ground – you can still discover new treasures under all those piles, clean things up, edit things out, fix things, get a grip. Tidiness suggests that something is as good as it's going to get. Tidiness makes me think of held breath, of suspended animation, while writing needs to breathe and move. (p 28-29)*

Despite the stories of Kurt Vonnegut and James Joyce who allegedly wrote each sentence till they thought it was perfect, it does seem to be the case that the vast majority of writers go for a rubbish draft, as Lamott puts it, that they can keep working on. Just get it down and don't delay over it is pretty common advice to academic writers too, but maybe it helps to know that this is the way that other writers work as well.

But, here in Lamott's creative writing advice we see more than the usual admonition about not agonising over each and every word first up. We also see something of the desirable 'product' – writing that has life, that is not suspended, that is messy, that is mobile, that is playful... Isn't that a good way to think about academic writing too?

*Pat has also recently published a book on writing:*

*Thomson, Pat and Kamler, Barbara 2012 Writing for peer reviewed journals. Strategies for getting published. London: Routledge.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

#### **About the author:**

**Pat Thomson** is Professor of Education at the University of Nottingham. Her current research focuses on creativity, the arts and change in schools and communities, and postgraduate writing pedagogies. She is currently devoting more time to exploring, reading and thinking about imaginative and inclusive pedagogies which sit at the heart of change. She blogs about her research at [Patter](#).

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