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Learning How to Write Successfully from Academic Writers

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Learning How to Write Successfully from Academic Writers

Abstract

There are numerous books on writing from academic writers, as well as fiction and non-fiction writers. For academic writers who may have had minimal training in writing, these sorts of books provide useful ideas for how to develop the habits of mind to write productively, as well as the skills in crafting their writing for their audiences. Helen Sword's book, *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write* is a trade book devoted to the task of informing readers about how successful academic writers work. Sword masterfully integrates findings from her large study of academic writing to support her thesis that to different degrees, successful academic writers share four sets of habits: those of behavioral, artisanal, social, and emotional habits. Beyond this, there are few commonalities to do with how successful academic writers are prepared and how they write. Sword's book elucidates how any academic writer might organize his or her writing life to be successful.

Keywords

Academic Writing, Learning to Write, Writing Up Qualitative Research

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Learning How to Write Successfully from Academic Writers

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*There are numerous books on writing from academic writers, as well as fiction and non-fiction writers. For academic writers who may have had minimal training in writing, these sorts of books provide useful ideas for how to develop the habits of mind to write productively, as well as the skills in crafting their writing for their audiences. Helen Sword's book, *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write* is a trade book devoted to the task of informing readers about how successful academic writers work. Sword masterfully integrates findings from her large study of academic writing to support her thesis that to different degrees, successful academic writers share four sets of habits: those of behavioral, artisanal, social, and emotional habits. Beyond this, there are few commonalities to do with how successful academic writers are prepared and how they write. Sword's book elucidates how any academic writer might organize his or her writing life to be successful. Keywords: Academic Writing, Learning to Write, Writing Up Qualitative Research*

I've read all sorts of books on writing and have learned something from each of them: how to prioritize writing among numerous other activities in higher education (Boice, 1990); how to get started and finish manuscripts (Becker, 1986); how to write up qualitative studies (Goodall, 2000, 2008; Wolcott, 2009); how to craft writing (Zinsser, 1976); how writing can be therapeutic (Klauser, 2003); and how to develop the kinds of skills needed for academic writing (Goodson, 2017). I've read books by scholars who have conducted research on academic writers (Boice, 2000) and books by fiction writers (Dillard, 1989; Le Guin, 1998). If one were to read a fraction of the literature on writing, one would not actually get to any writing at all!

Yet in all this reading, although I've always gleaned good ideas and useful advice that I've been able to incorporate, rarely have I felt truly inspired to sit down at my computer or take a pad and pen and write. This changed when I read Helen Sword's book, *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write*. Sword's book provides a source of encouragement and inspiration for writers: to write more, to take more risks in writing, to think about writing, and really reflect on what one wants to accomplish as a writer. If I were to tell you that the book is based on 100 interviews with academic writers and editors and anonymous surveys of over 1,200 writers in 15 countries that included academic faculty, research fellows, PhD students, and other writers working in academic contexts; I'm doubtful that this alone would inspire you to read it. Yet one of the more astonishing things about this book is that the style in which it is written makes it far more than just another report from a research study about academic writing. It is accessible, thought-provoking, and a joy to read.

Sword's book begins by explaining the source of the title: *Air & Light & Time & Space* which is drawn from a poem by Charles Bukowski (1920-1994), a German-born American poet and writer. For readers hoping to finally receive the sacred seven steps to the imagined nirvana in which writing takes place in a well-lit room with all the time in the world and no interruptions, one's hopes are dashed in the first paragraph of the preface. Sword quotes Bukowski: "If you're going to create/you're going to create" ... "air, and light and time and

space/have nothing to do with it” (Sword, 2017, p. ix). Yet Sword goes on to ask the questions that any scholars wondering about how they might write more, write more often, or in ways that take more risks or entail being vulnerable might ask:

Are academic writers doomed to a life of misery, slaving away by day in the educational equivalent of a coal mine and tapping out our manuscripts by night in the dim glow of a computer screen? What if we were to bring air and light and time and space back into the picture, reimagining ourselves not as suffering artists but as artisans of language: skilled craftspeople who trade in the written word and draw delight and satisfaction from our craft? (p. x)

Sword’s book answers both of these questions. First, findings from her extensive interviews and surveys of writers, her study of writing literature, and the artfulness of her book suggest that the answer is a definitive “no.” Yes, writing can be joyful and does not doom one to a life of misery. Second, the book provides directions for all writers to develop what Sword calls the “architecture” for building one’s own writing “dwelling”—which fortunately comes in all sizes, shapes, and colors. These guidelines provide ways to envision a writing life that brings in more air and light and time and space. Sword encourages readers to conceptualize the range of “real and imagined dwellings” as far wider than the “little boxes made of ticky tacky” referred to in Malvina Reynolds’ popular 1960s song (p. 204). There is no one-size-fits-all approach to being a successful academic writer. In Sword’s view, the varied shapes of the writing life would include dwellings as diverse as tents, igloos, buses, caves, hotel rooms, and single-family houses (p. 204).

The book starts with Sword’s premise that the only things that writers *do* have in common is a “BASE,” which entails *behavioral habits of mind* (involving persistence, determination, passion, pragmatism, “grit”); *artisanal habits* (involving creativity, craft, artistry, patience, practice, perfectionism, and a passion for lifelong learning), *social habits* (involving collegiality, collaboration, generosity, openness to criticism, and praise), and *emotional habits* (involving positivity, enjoyment, satisfaction, risk taking, resilience, and luck) (Sword, 2017, p. 4). These habits enable successful writers to carve out the necessary time to craft and hone their writing and seek feedback from others, all the while drawing pleasure from the process. Sword suggests that successful writers demonstrate these habits to differing degrees—that is, one might have strong behavioral and artisanal habits, but place less emphasis on social habits and gain fewer pleasures and positive gains from writing. Sword encourages writers to analyze their habits (you can assess your writing BASE profile at the website, *The writing base*: <http://writersdiet.com/basehome.php>).

Sword’s book is arranged in four sections, in which she examines three attributes of each of the four habits. The section on behavioral habits deals with finding time to write, the power of place, rhythms, and rituals. In artisanal habits, Sword discusses learning to write, the craft of writing, and strategies used by writers working in a non-native language. In the third section, social habits, writing for others, with others, and among others is reviewed. Finally, Sword talks about emotional habits, including ideas around pleasure, risk and resilience, and how we might critically engage with the metaphors we use in writing. Throughout each of the four parts, Sword illustrates the ideas with excerpts from interviews that she has conducted with academic writers. With the exception of one or two instances, authors and their affiliations are named—and scholars are likely to recognize many of those who participated in Sword’s study. Each chapter includes one-page vignettes in which readers learn more about individual scholars’ writing practices. Writing tends to be a private craft; in the town in which I live, even if one writes at a coffee shop, this typically means working over solitary laptops. Therefore, I enjoyed learning more about others’ views and approaches to writing. The end of each chapter

includes suggestions for readers which she labels “things to try.” These activities include reflection, alternative approaches with which to experiment, and bountiful suggestions for reading other sources on the topics discussed.

I enjoyed Sword’s debunking of some of the “writing lore” that has become entrenched in academic settings. For instance, Sword suggests that notions that all good scholars must maintain a daily writing practice as opposed to binge writing, or that they must complete a certain amount of writing each day are mistaken. Yes, daily writing does work for some scholars—and while it may be a useful strategy to set up a daily writing regimen to get started after a period of writer’s block — without the introduction of pleasure Sword suggests that this kind of practice may not ultimately be sustainable. What I took from her discussion of the many and varied approaches to writing (e.g., writing with others, engaging in lengthy periods of dedicated writing time, participating in writing retreats) is the importance of learning what strategies work best individually and ensuring that these are incorporated intentionally into one’s writing life. Or, perhaps, we could try new strategies and experiment with approaches that fly in the face of preferred practices.

What I loved about this book is that it is gentle, humble, and kind; it prompts without pushing, it encourages without browbeating. It suggests that there *are* ways to find joy and pleasure in writing for academic purposes. Yes, there may be frustration throughout the process, but by enhancing the four sets of habits that Sword suggests, any academic might tread the path to a more satisfying, productive, and ultimately enjoyable path to successful writing. Sword suggests that “by admitting more freedom of movement into our own writing habits,” a transformation of “the habitus of scholarly labor” can occur in which “all writers can flourish” (p. 206). Sword’s vision for a collegial, respectful, and generous community of academic writers in which scholarly writing is a joint enterprise in which we write to educate one another is to be applauded. Since reading this book, I’ve been recommending this book to students and colleagues alike. We could all do with some inspiration—and Sword’s book delivers just that.

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Author Note

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