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A WILL TO WRITE

That blinking cursor demands words from me

I am something of an old-fashioned scholar (well, some might think that, I suppose) and have a library of my own, accumulated over the years. As it happens, as I write this, there is literally in front of me a group of books on writing. None of those books is one of the standard texts on academic writing. Rather, they are an eclectic group and include books such as *Why I Write* by George Orwell, *The Writer's Voice* by Al Alvarez, *The Pleasure of the Text* by Roland Barthes, *This is not the end of the book* by Umberto Eco and Jean-Claude Carrière and *Rethinking Writing* by Roy Harris. That I have such a group of books on my shelves, and that they should occupy such a central position, perhaps says two things about me. First, that writing as such is important to me; and secondly, that I see academic writing as a kind of writing as such. That is, that what is important about academic writing is that it is a species of writing.

Does that need to be said? I believe that it does. We have, I think, slid into a sense that academic writing is not really a form of writing. It is not a form of communication that needs to be cared for and cared about. It is simply a technical matter, of conveying formal propositions, the understanding of which will be readily intuited by the reader. As such, the writing, as a complex craft with its own challenges of articulating meaning and effecting communication, fades from view as a matter deserving of attention in its own right.

Even while I was a teacher, researcher, scholar, administrator, senior manager and holding leadership positions and fulfilling a range of consultancy roles, I saw myself as a writer. Not as an academic writer but as a writer. That was and remains my primary identity. I believe that this is unusual among academics. I believe that, if asked, few academics would use the unadorned noun 'writer' to describe themselves. Indeed, writing is rarely a matter of debate among academics. It is very rarely discussed. And yet there is all manner of difficult issues in front of academics-as-writers, which therefore go unspoken and even unrecognised.

I want, in this article, to tease out some of these challenges. I also want to show why I think that writing is important for academic life and should be understood to be rightfully challenging and, thereby, why it is deserving of explicit attention.



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Why write?

In the book of his that I have just mentioned, George Orwell suggests that there ‘four great motives for writing’. He adds ‘at any rate, for writing prose’ but I want to ignore that rider for his points are pertinent here. His four motives are (in brief):

- (1) ‘Sheer egoism – desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood [...]’
- (2) Aesthetic enthusiasm - perception of beauty in the external world, or, on the other hand, in words and their right arrangement [...]
- (3) Historical impulse – desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts [...]
- (4) Political purpose – using the word “political” in the widest sense; desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people’s idea of the kind of society that they should strive after [...]

Being open with the reader, Orwell observes of himself that he is ‘a person in whom the first three motives would outweigh the fourth’. For myself, I would say that all four motives are at work within me, in energising my writing efforts. It will have been noticed that, in Orwell’s list above, motive (1) contains four exemplifications – and again I would have to testify at least to the second, third and fourth expressions of that particular motive being present within me. To avoid the risk of further embarrassment, I had better leave that matter there.

I would just, though, add a *fifth motive* to Orwell’s list, that of a ‘communicative impulse’. One cannot hope to take the mind of the reader onwards unless one is also determined to write in such a way as to communicate one’s thoughts as clearly as possible to the reader. The good writer, accordingly, will have a deep concern to reach out to her or his potential readers, and will write very consciously for her/his particular audience(s).

I would also make an observation about the order in which Orwell has placed his motives. For me, number (3) comes first. That is to say, one’s writing is fuelled by a concern with some matter in the world and a determination to set the record straight in some way. I put the point slightly extravagantly deliberately.

A ‘matter in the world’ might be a point of view or a position or a debate in the contemporary literature; it might be a situation in professional life or, say, a government policy that bears upon that professional life; or it might be an idea or a concept that has occurred to one that appears to have some significance beyond itself. And ‘putting the record straight’ means here getting to grips with the issue that one has identified and wrestling with it to the best of one’s ability.

The point here is that unless one has something that is gripping one and which one wants to resolve in some way, one’s writing will be lacking in energy and in direction. The other four motives (Orwell’s plus my own addition) – advancing oneself, caring about writing as such, wanting to change things in some way and being determined to communicate – are empty and will lead to shallow writing unless they come into play in the service of one’s wanting to grapple honestly with a significant issue.

Why is this last point important, as I believe it to be? Until quite recently, say around forty years ago, even so-called elite universities conducted relatively little research. Largely, academics taught and would write only occasionally. One could gain the title of ‘Professor’ without a higher degree and on the basis of just one or two papers. Now, academics in many universities – both older and newer – are expected to produce papers and to gain their publication in (leading) journals. Expectations to write come upon academics from beyond themselves – from their own institution, from their peer group and from tacit international norms represented in global league tables. There is, then, a tendency for writing to become an externally imposed form of academic labour. In turn, it is hardly surprising if all too often academic writing becomes somewhat lacklustre, with abstracts populated with verbs such as ‘discuss’ and ‘explore’, intimating the fare to come; namely, simply an exploration of the literature and issues on a particular topic, which, in the end, amounts to very little.

Saying something and something to say

Good academic writing, accordingly, should be saying *something*. An academic who turns to writing, even if intended for academic journals and even if wrestling with abstruse matters, should be wanting

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to say something. In other words, each piece of writing should contain and should expound a thesis. (Doctorate students typically come to understand that the term ‘thesis’ refers to a large and heavy text; they often fail to grasp that the more important meaning of the term is in referring to the heart of an argument that they should be expounding through the body of their text).

All too often, I suggest, pieces of academic writing lack a definite thesis. One explanation we have already touched upon, namely the press on academics simply to write; and their academic writing has to be fitted in with all the many pressures upon them, both in their academic lives and at home. Forging a thesis and arguing cogently for that is a step too far. A second explanation is that the identification of a thesis – becoming clear in one’s own mind with razor-sharp clarity as to the thesis one wants to drive forward – is extremely hard work. A third is that it calls for thought, and many academics may feel that they simply do not have time to think, being so busy just getting through the day. (Heidegger’s book, *What is Called Thinking?*, draws attention to the thoughtlessness now characteristic of modern life).

But there is a crucial fourth explanation at work. It is that the forging of a thesis and carrying it through takes courage. And courage here works on more than one plane. One needs courage as an academic writer simply because once a work is published, it is there in the public domain. No action replay! One is then exposed in a stark way to the critical gaze of others. Secondly, one needs courage to sign oneself up to a definite position, to stake out one’s particular territory, and perhaps over time – for good or for ill – to become known for *that*. And thirdly, in taking up a position of any substance, one will be inevitably going against the grain, to some extent, of existing authorities. This is especially a challenge in today’s climate, in which there is such a strong set of expectations to publish and one is dependent on the gatekeepers (editors, anonymous reviewers and publishers) to think well of one’s efforts.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, if one would rather do anything but write. John Henry Newman, a Victorian scholar who wrote huge amounts – including *The Idea of a University*, perhaps the

most influential text ever on the topic – talked of the ‘bodily pain’ that writing caused him. And I empathise with that phrase. The pain, or perhaps severe discomfort might be a better term, is a product – as we have seen – of both internal and external presences. There is the internal struggle, trying to make sense of the murmurings within one, bringing feelings, values, cognitions, evidence and imaginings into a coherent story. And there is the external struggle, in trying to write in such a way that one’s efforts might satisfy demanding audiences of various kinds. The blinking cursor may be demanding words from one, but just how is one to find an orderly series of words that will meet such complex challenges?

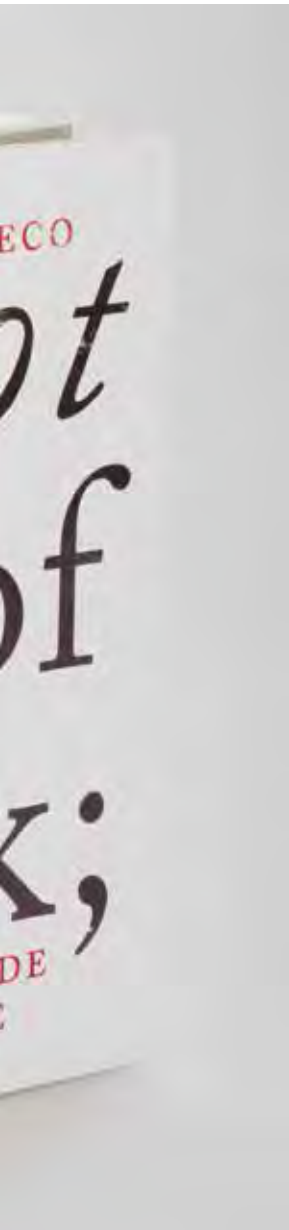
Going about the task

It is apparent that the task in question presents itself on different levels. There is the task today, of a typical writing session; there is the piece of writing on which one is working; and there is the larger task of becoming and being a writer, albeit an academic writer. I shall deal with all three levels together, but it is worth keeping them in mind as distinctive challenges.

If one is going to become an academic writer in the way I have been talking about it – and not just an academic who writes – then one will be writing regularly. For myself, if a day passes without my having written something (or at least worked on an already existing draft), then I feel that the day has not been fully satisfactory. Typically, creative artists – composers, painters, fiction writers – will be in their studios or at their desks at a particular hour in the day and will work there for some hours. It was famously said of Kant, the great German philosopher, that the citizens of his home town could time their watches through Kant going for a walk in the afternoon after he had spent the morning writing. The point is that there has to be some regularity, however modest, to one’s writing efforts.

Modesty and realism are the watchwords here. There is no point in saying internally ‘I am going to write 500 words a day’ only to fall by the wayside after two or three days, with the realisation that the goal has been too demanding. Much better to have a more modest goal that is realistic given





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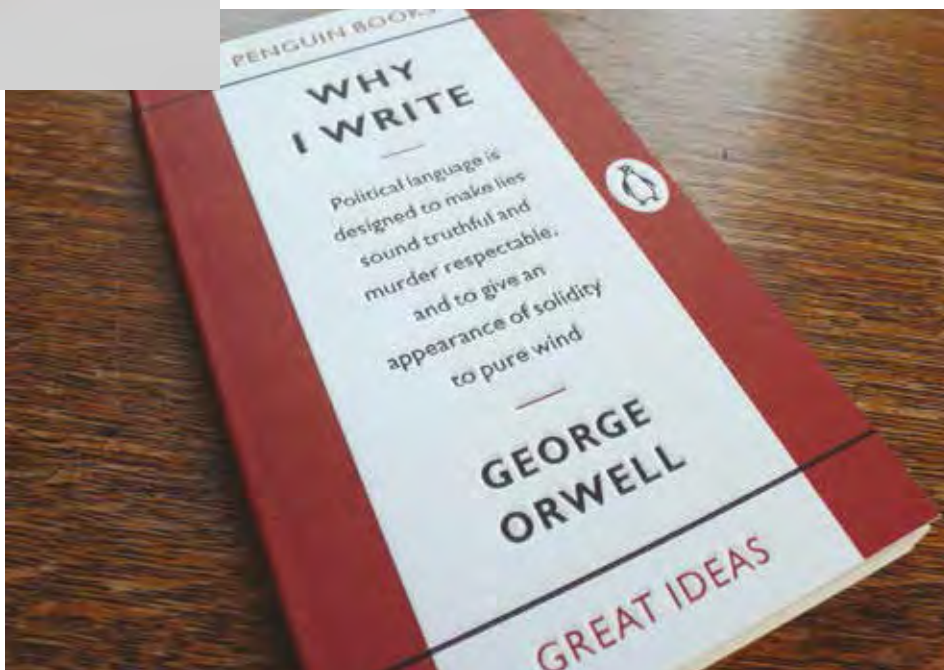


the many demands on one's life (both as an academic and more widely with one's personal life). Perhaps a week will be a better writing unit, with one's writing being accomplished largely on say Friday and the weekend. The trick is to find a way of structuring into one's life a realistic writing component. A short writing session more or less every day – or the equivalent over a week – will see one making rapid progress. Perhaps a goodly number of words to aim at might be, say, 1,500 across the course of a week. That's an average of less than a page a day or, say, around half-an-hour's writing each day. Continued over time, that is equivalent to a book a year!

It is evident, then, that very limited goals are the order of the day. For myself, I never sit in front of the computer and say to myself that I am going to write a paper, still less that I am going to write a book. To place such challenges on me would be far too onerous. Nothing would get written. What I say to myself is that, today, I am going to write about one and a half pages (and it might be a little more or less). When I have achieved that, the writing session is finished and I stop and turn to the other many items in my to-do list for the day.

There are two riders here. First, of course, this drip-drip approach to writing produces its own challenges. It all sounds as if writing is here just a matter of labour, of routine, but wasn't that what was to be avoided? Where is the room for inspiration? I repeat: this steady-steady approach to writing is precisely how creative artists go about their work. Their imaginative creations flow from steady and, indeed, painstaking work undertaken over time. More, their creativity arises precisely from such disciplined work accomplished on a regular basis. As the old saying goes, it is a matter of 98% perspiration and 2% inspiration. If one is working steadily, then one's mind will spontaneously be mulling over issues during the day (and night) and ideas will be coming to one. Therein lies the basis of genuine creativity as one wrestles authentically with one's own academic problems for and by oneself.

Secondly, how can one ensure that the thoughts in one's mind have a continuity to them, when the work is being interrupted in this way? How can one pick up the threads and recall what was in one's mind



on an earlier day? I have found that if I let the sun set twice on a piece of writing on which I am working it is difficult to pick up the threads. Sometimes – as last night! – I leave myself with a question which I then have to answer as I start to write; and little techniques like that help to maintain a steady and directional flow of thought.

There is, though, a structure to one's writing efforts; we might even call it a set of disciplines. In a typical writing session, one is picking up from where one left off and trying to continue the line of thought or analysis. But that writing will have some boundary markers. There may have been a sub-heading, perhaps two or three pages back, and the words and the propositions one is forming should hang together within the frame supplied by the sub-heading. In turn, the sub-heading and its section of text has its place in the overall flow of the whole paper, all headed by a particular and carefully chosen title. And there will be, too, a sense as to how the paper will be going forward, towards its concluding section.

The architect, the artist and the craftsman

The academic writer, accordingly, is a kind of architect, designing a building. And the building has a general character – it is in economics, or in anthropology or in business studies – but much room is left for invention, even while attending to the disciplines involved. There may be some characteristic materials that one uses at any moment in time; fashions that come and go (certain terms, certain researchers to whom reference might be made, and certain ways of reasoning and expounding of an argument). There is also the architecture of the whole piece of text: do the parts fit and work together to form a coherent entity? As a reader, is one being led progressively from one room to another, with slightly different vistas opening through the windows? This metaphor of architecture is, therefore, highly potent for me as an academic writer.

It is important to aim to produce a first draft quite quickly; and then one has something to work on. There are so many considerations that one cannot hope to do them all justice straightaway in first draft. Just some features to attend to are the references and the bibliography, the reasoning, the sequencing of the argument, the depth and robustness of the data and its analysis, the ordering of the parts of the text, the length of the paragraphs and the sentences (which are characteristically far too long in academic writing), the integrity of each paragraph and each sentence, the overall development of the thesis, the balance of the sections and the effectiveness of the introduction and of the conclusion. Typically, I would say that one needs to work one's paper through five or six drafts to get it to a taut and polished state where it can be submitted to a journal. (My books go through many more readings and reworkings – but that effort moves forward. There is a definite end to the process.)

I have mentioned the metaphor of architecture, of seeing the forming of a text as that of designing a building. In giving expression to the crafting of an academic text, yet other metaphors come to me; for instance, seeing oneself as a kind of sculptor or impressionist painter or playwright.

The sculptor of very large objects, I take it, has to start by forming a rough shape out of a block and then works on that, and so the envisaged object starts

to emerge before one. But there is a kind of conversation, such that the sculptor responds to the material and to the object and perhaps new ideas develop in this conversation. So too with academic writing, as one works on one's drafts, seeing new possibilities, and other structurings, arrangements of the parts and orientations. *The impressionist artist*, I presume, has an acute sense that very small inflections of paint can make a telling difference to a painting, *even if imperceptible*. There is, perhaps, always a temptation to do more, to add yet another speck of paint here rather than there. So too in academic writing, not least in using word-processors, search engines and computerised data analyses. But the artist has to be prepared to stop, to step aside. *And the playwright* has the challenge of determining who are the main characters, which parts they may have, when they are to appear, when they are to be brought forward and have speaking parts. So too in academic writing, as one determines which research and scholars one will attend to, and which themes, issues and concepts, and in which part of the story.

It follows that the expression 'writing up one's research' should be banned for writing is a creative and a crucial part of the research. In good academic writing, one works at one's ideas, trying to bring them forward so as to be pleasing, to have a harmonious inter-relationship between them, and to exhibit soundness and sureness of grasp of one's material.

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A word could always be more apt, a phrase more telling, a sentence tauter, a paragraph a happier rhythm and a text as a whole more transparent and lighter structure. There is artistry here

This is a concern without end. A word could always be more apt, a phrase more telling, a sentence tauter, a paragraph a happier rhythm and a text as a whole more transparent and lighter structure. There is artistry here.

In his book on *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett talks of a craft becoming a kind of obsession (Sennett, 2008:245). This is not a bad word here. To be obsessed as a craftsman is to care deeply about communicating to maximum effect in one's writing. Such care leads to a continuing concern to work at one's text, not merely on the detail for its own sake but so as to help the reader gain an acute understanding without too much difficulty of what is in one's mind as a writer. This is more readily stated than achieved.

So often I see two contiguous sentences, each of which is fine itself but where the link between them is unclear. Characteristically, this is due to the writer not spelling out all the steps in the argument; and not noticing the gap. Indeed, if pressed, she or he may well think – and even say – of course, 'the point is evident!' To them, the steps in the argument are clear in their mind, so clear that they fail to realise that they have not set down all those steps in the construction of the paragraph in question.

Here, yet another metaphor beckons: good writing is like putting in layers of bricks in the construction of a building. Each brick has its place and each brick is doing work; and one cannot put in a higher layer of bricks unless each layer underneath has been painstakingly put in. Otherwise, the necessary support won't be in place, to bear the weight of the argument or propositions. In writing, it is all too tempting to jump to those upper layers, where the argument begins to get interesting, but each brick – and each point in the argument – needs carefully first to be put in place. This can be laborious, spelling out each point, especially when it may feel that all the reasoning is apparent. But the (academic) writer cannot afford to leave the reader wondering as to how a proposition or how a particular step or even how a particular technical term has been reached. All has to be translucent.

Concluding thoughts

Increasingly, academic work is being required to show its impact upon the world. Amongst other things, this point of view places an injunction upon academic writing that it be as effective as possible. This means, in turn, that academics are, in effect, being required to concern themselves with the quality of their writing. But what this surely means in turn too is that academics need to think even more about their audiences and write in such ways as to reach out to their audiences. These considerations hold across all disciplines, especially those with obvious social, political, professional and policy implications.

Having a concern for one's writing, caring about the choice of words and the construction of sentences and paragraphs and advancing a definite and coherent thesis are therefore becoming matters of public importance. The word 'public' here is crucial. In taking writing seriously, academics collectively can have 'impact' in a rather obvious way (as measured by performance indicators) but, more importantly, can help to forge a public realm. Through good writing that reaches out to multiple publics, academics will become public intellectuals in a natural and organic way.

But more significantly still, through caring about writing, and working at it modestly and diligently, academics will come to change themselves. This is an extraordinary feature of writing, that ultimately its largest impact is on the writer her- or himself. One comes to see the world in new ways but, more, one comes even to see oneself in a new way. Good writing is a voyage into a new personal space. The writer ultimately transforms herself.

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Keywords

Being a writer, writing, academic writing, writing strategies

