

ACADEMICS AND THEIR WRITING*

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Writing ought to be of interest to academics because research is not complete until reported. Yet little is known about attitudes toward writing or the skills it requires.

Both of us (a geographer and a psychologist respectively) enjoy writing, and had independently formed the impression that such enjoyment was far from universal. To find out how our colleagues viewed the matter, we distributed a questionnaire to the entire academic staff of University College London in the summer term of 1976. Here we discuss replies to our first question: 'how much do you enjoy the actual process of writing?'. The response rate was low, with only 170 replies (17 per cent) received.

Many of our colleagues find writing immensely enjoyable, others excruciatingly distasteful, most a combination of the two. One estimated his usual feeling about writing as three-quarters of the way along a line from love to hate.

Most respondents saw getting started as the most difficult part of writing. 'I can think of an infinity of excuses for not embarking', wrote one; 'once started it's much easier to keep going.' Another never thought he was going to enjoy writing before he started, and was relieved when he found he had finished. Once started, he was often too absorbed to notice the effort.

Tales of procrastination were legion. Putting off the painful beginning of writing is an almost universal experience. However, no amount of practice seems to lessen the difficulty of filling up the first blank page. The problem may be ameliorated if one remembers that a first draft is not a sacred document: it is more like a sketch which becomes a stimulus to further thought.

Those who enjoyed writing were no less forthright than those who disliked it. A psychologist considered the satisfaction of writing like 'that of an athlete or ballet dancer, whose performance may involve much effort and even pain, however easy and graceful it may seem'.

Those who tried to explain why writing gave them satisfaction emphasized that the end product was by no means the sole reward. They expressed delight in bringing order out of chaos, fashioning clear and comprehensible sentences, reducing a diffuse and incoherent jumble to a tight, compact argument.

Clear writing was considered a key not only to effective communication, but also towards self-understanding. 'The process of writing represents a progress towards an exact clarification of thoughts and conclusions for myself', a historian explained. One respondent added that writing 'leads to new insights into material and new results'.

To several respondents, writing was not merely an aid to thought, but a way of thinking essential to intellectual endeavour. A historian expressed this cogently: 'For me, literary composition is part of the process of scholarly research and discovery; for only in the course of working out exactly how I

wish to present findings in my subject do I finally arrive at the discovery of what I have found out.' A political economist used this insight in his teaching. 'Only when spelling out thoughts on paper do I become fully aware of the gaps, obscurities and inconsistencies that until then were lurking undetected.' Hence he wrote out lectures in full.

Such remarks on writing suggest the shortcomings of making preliminary plans or outlines—a procedure often prescribed for students. As another put it: 'Writing for me is an experience of knowing what to say. I can make endless schemes of how the piece should run but it never comes out according to plan. Until I have written a paragraph, I do not even know whether what I am saying is true. Once it is down in black and white I frequently see that it is not and then I have to ask myself why it is not . . .'

This comment epitomizes our major finding. Those who planned their writing in detail ahead of time generally disliked the process; those who could think only as they wrote, enjoyed it most. And the latter enjoyed it in large measure because they recognized its role, not just in clarifying ideas, but also in originating them.

Those who enjoy writing seem to be implicitly aware that the creative process demands a degree of uncertainty. Constructing paragraphs, ordering sentences, choosing words, and shaping the whole into a coherent piece of work is satisfying not simply because it interprets research in the most appropriate way, but also because it enables one to question assumptions, to rethink conclusions, and to develop new lines of inquiry.

Some academics implicitly regard thought and its expression in writing as sharply separate; they believe they have an 'idea' which remains constant, and which should be expressed in just those words that best communicate it. For them writing is a serial process to be monitored and corrected as the words are set down, should they fail to match or convey the original ideas.

An alternative method of composition, favoured by others, is to write out entire drafts without stopping for revision. One moves on from a paragraph that eludes ready formulation, in the belief that it will later seem redundant or fall into place after more is written. The final text emerges from a series of successive drafts rather than from the serial correction of one draft. Whether these two approaches to writing are connected with differences in personality, with different learning procedures, or with different demands of the various disciplines is at present unknown.

Even these preliminary results raise important practical questions, in view of the acknowledged impoverishment of language. Many of our colleagues experience grave difficulties in writing and many others also exhibit intense ambivalence towards it; our students, not surprisingly, exhibit more accentuated difficulties. Many of us have encountered intelligent graduates who seem incapable of connecting one sentence with another, and who do not know what it means to rewrite a chapter in a thesis. How can they be helped when they do not even recognize that a problem exists? Can writing be taught at all, and if so, in what way? By precept, practice, or imitation? By a constant questioning of what each sentence means? By writing as if one were someone else? By developing a sense of audience? By asking for something to be put in another way? And how is progress to be measured? The problem must be explicitly stated if it is to be solved.

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