

Academic Writing and Teamwork Skills:

Foundations for Success in Higher Education and the Modern Workplace

Group Written Report – Component 2

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Group Members

Roxana Simulescu 2528753

Ana Maria Raducanu 2531008

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1. Introduction

From higher education to the working world, a range of transferable skills beyond that of the content is more and more critical to success. Academic writing and teamwork are two of the most common attributes that are cited by employers and academic staff and educational researchers (Salas, Reyes and McDaniel, 2018; Wingate, 2018). Written assessments are the primary form of assessment used for undergraduate courses in most disciplines, and modern organizations are opening up to work in interdependent teams to create products, services and innovation. However, many students begin university lacking the skills to write like researchers or to work together for long periods of time (Wingate and Harper, 2021; Mathieu, Wolfson and Park, 2018). This report focuses on the two academic skills of academic writing and teamwork, which go hand-in-hand. First, it provides a definition of each skill and the key components of each skill. It then considers the significance of each in academic and professional contexts, based on the latest peer-reviewed research. It then suggests strategies, based on evidence, which students and young professionals can use to build these skills. Lastly, the report brings the discussion together to derive implications for learners and teachers. The goal is to show that academic writing and teamwork are not just study skills, but integral competencies needed for students' learning outcomes, employability and future work performance. The discussion will be based on current literature from applied linguistics, education and organisational psychology throughout, which means that the recommendations will be based on a credible and up-to-date empirical base rather than generic 'study-skills advice'.

2. Definition of the Skills

2.1 Academic Writing

Academic writing is an act that is both a communicative practice and a social act in which the members of a discipline build, share and appraise knowledge (Hyland and Hyland, 2019). It includes characteristics such as overt argumentation, hesitation to make claims, evidence (citation), and specific forms such as dissertations, essays, literature reviews and laboratory reports (Bailey, 2018). As Wingate (2018) proposes, it is important to see academic writing as an “academic literacy” – a “set of textual,

“rhetorical and epistemological practices” (p.31), which can be different in different disciplines and not a “one-size-fits-all skill” (p.30). Key elements are planning and organising, critical engagement with sources, clarity of expression, accurate referencing and reflective revision (Bailey, 2018; Hyland and Hyland, 2019).

2.2 Teamwork

Teamwork is the interdependent process of two or more people who coordinate cognition, behaviour and affect to accomplish a shared goal (Salas, Reyes and McDaniel, 2018). Cognitive processes (e.g., shared mental models, situational awareness); behavioural processes (e.g., coordination, communication, and mutual performance monitoring); and affective states (e.g., psychological safety, cohesion, and trust) are the three overlapping domains identified as effective teamwork, building on decades of empirical work (Driskell, Salas and Driskell, 2018). Tannenbaum and Salas (2020) summarise this evidence into a ‘seven drivers’ framework; capabilities, cooperation, coordination, communication, cognition, coaching and conditions are all important to team effectiveness. Importantly, these authors differentiate between a task work aspect (what a team actually delivers) and a team work aspect (how it is done while delivering) which are both critical and can be separately practiced. Both frameworks highlight that team work is not simply working in a team, but a set of competences that can be learned over time, systematically, and involves both interpersonal and task domain competencies (Lacerenza et al., 2018).

3. Academic Writing is Important

Academic writing plays a crucial role in the success of students since it is the main medium of evaluation of learning in university (Bailey, 2018). By comparing case studies, Wingate and Harper (2021) show that undergraduates who, in their first assignment, mastered expectations of the genre, argument structure, and source integration, earned significantly higher marks than those who focused on surface features such as grammar or word count. Written Coursework makes students' learning evident, allowing them to show what they know and learn how to evaluate, make inferences and give reasons for certain ideas – specifically skills that assessment criteria in the United Kingdom Higher Education explicitly reward (Wingate, 2018). Weak academic writing thus limits overall performance, even if

subject knowledge is good, and can also impact further module progression as a low writing score in the initial year can reduce confidence, engagement and self-efficacy in later years.

Clear and persuasive communication through writing is also significant in the workplace. As noted by Hyland and Hyland (2019), the conventions students learn when writing essays – logical ordering and progression, using evidence to support an argument, register and accurate citations – have a direct impact on the reports, proposals, policy briefs and grant applications which characterize professional communication in the knowledge economy. Written communication is a key graduate skill which is consistently cited by employers in all industries as a top graduate skill and lack is frequently cited as a factor that can contribute to project failure, regulatory errors and reputational damage (Wingate, 2018). Academic writing skills are not merely a valuable asset in professions like law, healthcare, engineering and accountancy, but a requirement, or a skill which is produced in the academic world but is expected to be shown to be skill in the workplace. (Bailey, 2018).

Another intellectual aspect of academic writing is actually that of making sense by creating a draft and revising it on the way. For example, writing is not just a form of demonstration, it is also a form of learning because in articulating a complicated idea in writing mode, gaps in understanding become apparent, and gaps in understanding can only be filled by reading (Bailey, 2018). This 'writing to learn' is especially useful for those who are in professions that require ongoing reflective practice, evidence is required for decisions, and lifelong learning is a responsibility. Building academic writing skills while in the undergraduate program is therefore both an investment in higher grades and a long-term investment in analytical skills needed for higher level careers.

4. Importance of Teamwork

Over the last 10 years, the amount of scientific evidence regarding teamwork has grown in a fast way. Research into the performance of teams versus groups of equivalent individuals dates back to the Hawthorne studies, and Mathieu, Wolfson and Park (2018) conclude that, overall, teams outperform equivalent collections of individuals in virtually every organizational context that has been studied – including

healthcare, engineering, education and creative industries. This finding supports the evidence synthesised in a meta analysis by Salas, Reyes and McDaniel (2018) which consistently demonstrates that team effectiveness is reliably shown to relate to greater productivity, safety, innovation and satisfaction. To put it simply, teamwork is one of the strongest predictors of the success of an organisation in the applied psychology literature.

In education systems, team-work skills are also being set into the curriculum, as part of group work, lab works, peer review, problem based learning, etc. (Lacerenza et al., 2018). They are pedagogical activities that are not just a convenience: they build cognitive and interpersonal skills like common sense or constructive disagreement, self-regulation—which is hard to develop in isolation. Driskell, Salas and Driskell (2018) report that students who learned to collaborate in a structured way are likely to apply this proficiently in future work teams, while others not given the opportunity to learn this collaborative approach often find it difficult to coordinate and communicate well in the workplace.

The relevance of teamwork in the workplace is even stronger. Today, in most organisations, whether it's patient care, software organisations or strategic planning, almost all complex tasks are the result of interdependent teams working together, instead of stand-alone individuals doing individual work (Tannenbaum and Salas, 2020). With a growing hybrid work style, cross-functional and globally distributed, employees need to work with other people who are across different expertise, culture and time zone. Rather than individual employee talent, the competitive advantage of a firm now lies in the quality of the firm's team processes, they argue. The ability to create and cultivate a sense of psychological safety, to engage in conflict in productive ways, and to understand how to communicate effectively in virtual settings therefore makes students with this skillset more marketable, and more likely to be promoted upon hiring into a leadership position. These results are consistent across a wide range of fields from aviation to oncology and consumer technology, pointing towards a need to consider teamwork as a fundamental professional skill, rather than a granular or "soft" ability (Salas, Reyes and McDaniel, 2018).

5. Strategies to improve Academic Writing

At the moment, the applied linguistics literature is filled with two evidence-based strategies: genre-based instruction for engaging with disciplinary models, and a cyclical process of drafting, feedback and revision.

Analysis of the Text genre and Disciplinary reading.

Academic writing is specific to particular disciplines and Wingate (2018) recommends a “genre-based” approach that involves systematic analysis of authentic texts in the learners' discipline. In practice, this involves reading two or three of good quality journal articles or model assignments, and looking at how they develop introductions, place arguments in the context of prevailing debates, use sources and indicate their own position by hedging and evaluative language. Templates are given by Bailey (2018) and it is suggested that students create a personal glossary of phrases and rhetorical moves appropriate to the discipline. Learners absorb their genre and are able to use the conventions of the genre in their written work over time. In the comparative study of the two approaches to developing texts, Wingate and Harper (2021) have demonstrated how, when undergraduate students know the requirements of their discipline's markers and reflect this in their writing, they perform better than those who don't know or who follow generic study-skills advice.

The student can provide and receive feedback in an iterative drafting process and revise their work.

The second approach emphasizes a process approach to writing rather than writing as an event. A large amount of research has demonstrated that feedback from tutors, peers and – increasingly – structured self-assessment, when applied promptly, specifically and then followed up in a subsequent draft, is one of the strongest levers for developing students' writing, as summarised by Hyland and Hyland (2019). Students are thus encouraged to break up their assignments into three stages: an outline stage during which the argument and evidence base are mapped out; a full draft stage; and a substantive revision stage based on feedback and re-reading. Bailey (2018) suggests that it is best to have at least twenty-four hours between drafting and editing to allow writers to view their own work objectively and objectively, and also suggests that a checklist of common areas of weakness including weak topic sentences and long sentences can be developed and applied in future writing. Peer review, in a guided question format (not in the form of comments), is especially useful because it introduces students to other rhetorical options and fosters evaluative judgment which is important for the process of self-editing (Hyland and Hyland, 2019).

These two approaches combine make academic writing an intuitive practice into a deliberate one that can be learned and revised with practice and thoughtful self-checking.

6. Improving Teamwork – Strategies

The research literature of the last few decades on the development of teams broadly agrees on two team development strategies that are effective: deliberate creation of psychological safety and alignment of clear roles and goals.

6.1 Structured Team Training

Based on the meta-analytic evidence, Lacerenza et al. (2018) present a taxonomy of team development interventions that support evidence-based practice, revealing that formal team training interventions have medium to large evidence of enhancing team processes and performance outcomes. The usual format of an effective intervention is to use information delivery about team science, guided practice and reflective debrief to provide team members the opportunity to translate what they have learned into behaviour. This can be translated for students into small training on team roles, decision making rules, after action review and then be used in project work in the course. Tannenbaum and Salas (2020) suggest that even small teams should have a short kick-off meeting to establish goals, roles and communication norms and have some sort of check-in debrief at the end of the project to consider what went well and what might be different next time. This basic practice enhances group experience and turns it into transferable learning.

6.2 Building Psychological Safety and Role Clarity

The second strategy speaks to conditions—affective and structural—that affect the teamwork environment. Driskell, Salas and Driskell (2018) highlight that for team members to share their thoughts and feelings, challenge each other's expectations, and reveal their own errors, they need to feel safe to do so, without shame or fear of being ridiculed or retaken. When it exists, there is more open sharing of information, mistakes are more likely to be found early and there is better ability to combine different points of view. According to Salas, Reyes and McDaniel (2018), the following deliberate exercises are recommended: (1) Invite quieter team members to share their

ideas first, (2) reframe the early disagreement as input to the process not personal critique, and (3) demonstrate giving yourself permission to be uncertain. In a student setting, issuing a statement at the beginning about what an appropriate method of resolving conflict will be and how credit will be given for contributions could reduce the petty resentments which often plague coursework groups. In addition to these interpersonal behaviors, clear roles (i.e., clear responsibility, decision authority, and accountability) can be beneficial to teams because when responsibilities are clearly defined, there is less need for coordination, and there is less duplication (Tannenbaum and Salas, 2020). According to Mathieu, Wolfson and Park (2018), one of the most consistent predictors of a team's failure is role ambiguity, while those teams that reexamine and reconfigure roles as the project moves forward perform better over time. A combination of structured training and a carefully orchestrated environment of psychological safety and clear roles allows teams to shift from a group of competent people to a cohesive unit that, collectively, performs better than its individual members.

7. Conclusion

This report has investigated two academic skills, which together form a web of interrelated abilities supporting success in academic and work life: academic writing and teamwork. Academic writing was considered as a socially located and discipline-specific practice which creates and shares knowledge, and teamwork as a combination of cognitive, behavioral and affective processes in which people work together to reach a common goal. Recent peer-reviewed evidence suggests that both skills are predictive of academic achievement and future workforce success in part because that they develop higher order thinking and interpersonal skills that both universities and employers clearly value.

These strategies (genre analysis and iterative drafting processes for academic writing, structured team training, and building of psychological safety and role clarity for team working) are based on the latest research in applied linguistics and organisational psychology. Combined they provide experts in education and beginning staff with an action-oriented, evidence-based pathway to continuous growth. The academic institution, and students, should not assume these skills exist or are "outside the curriculum", but rather postulate them as a core, learnable competency for which hard work and reflection should be rewarded. Undergraduate academic writing and

cooperation have an immediate impact on grades and group projects, and most importantly on the essential communicative and cooperative tools necessary to succeed in real life. As students in the 21st century are faced with hybrid working models, interdisciplinary issues, and evolving information environments, the ability to write persuasively and collaborate effectively will continue to equip graduates to help in their chosen fields.

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