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Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills Second Edition

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Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential tasks and skills

John Swales and Christine Feak (2004)

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

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The success of the first edition of *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* can be attributed to the need for a book on L2 writing in English in university settings that actually took language learners into account. That it maintains the useful focus on discourse and genre, exploring the types of organizational structures used in academic texts. But within these parameters, the book has also been thoroughly revised, updated, broadened in scope, and ongoing changes in the nature of academic writing for graduate students. I begin this review by outlining the aims and contents of this new edition of the book, then provide a panoramic view of L2 writing research.

Academic Writing for Graduate Students is targeted at students whose first language is not English. It is intended for students of various kinds in English as part of their post-graduate studies. In this, it is evidently directed at those whom Swales and Feak themselves teach at the University of Michigan, but is also useful for a wider audience.

or bilingual postgraduate programs in the European context.

The book is divided into eight units, the first three of which are essentially preparatory, focusing on general writing skills and problem-process-solution texts. The next three units are more specific, dealing with different text-types. The last two units of the book demonstrate how these different text-types knit together into the whole, which is particularly useful. There are also four rather heterogeneous appendixes, which deal with different aspects of writing a sample mini-project.

Of all the units, the first is particularly useful as a brief introduction to what academic writing is, and as a starter module for writing courses, since it homes in on precisely the types of misunderstandings that students encounter as they embark on the painful transition into prose. One legacy of communicative methodology is that students are often proficient in the spoken language while remaining unaware of the conventions that operate in the written mode. The book introduces students gently into notions of audience, purpose, organization and style, while offering a range of examples and a means by which a formal written style is achieved.

The other unit which I particularly appreciated focused on writing critiques, which is a demanding task that even students with academic experience may have equipped them poorly for taking a personal stance and providing a critical analysis (see Swales and Feak, 1991). Swales and Feak provide a full-scale example of an article to be analyzed, with draft critiques and a model of critique that can be modeled and evaluated in the classroom.

In all of this, *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* has undergone a fairly thorough methodological review with regard to the source material used. The book draws on a wider range of disciplines, and the data used are authentic recent data where possible; and the book has kept pace with new research concerning the inter- and intra-disciplinary variations in the structure of research papers.

From the point of view of classroom use, the book abounds with useful exercises for students to practice writing conventions, and to practice various aspects of academic writing. On the whole, this is a valuable resource for every writing center. However, in my experience the Swales approach is not without problems. One problem is its broad scope (one is never entirely sure whether the book is written for teachers, for students in the classroom, or for both), partly because of the amount of time needed to do justice to the material. One problem is that it is aimed at an intermediate level of English require more grammatical and lexical back-up of a general nature than the book provides, whereas students who already have a good enough command of the written mode may prefer to work systematically through a textbook of this kind. In this sense, it is probably useful for students to use this as a resource rather than a textbook, or to use parts of it in conjunction with other texts.

With regard to current issues in L2 writing, it is evident that Swales and Feak are anxious to move away from the proscriptive end of genre-based teaching, despite their evident reliance on the tools of discourse analysis. They do share some of the underlying principles of genre pedagogies, namely that L2 writers should be encouraged to write in real-world situations, and that giving them access to “occluded” genres may aid in this process.

and “recipes” for writing. In the introduction to the new edition, Swales and Feak ward off critical pedagogies by saying that their book is “as much concerned with developing academic texts” (p. 2). In the decade that has elapsed since the first edition was published, we have caused by reifying the text, fossilizing the genre and inducing L2 writers to ventriloquate L1 and Feak are at pains to emphasize the need for learners to “apply their analytical skills to explore how effective academic writing is achieved” (p. 2).

The difficulty here, faced by those of us at the rock face of L2 writing, is that students—part unhappy with uncertainty, and lack the necessary skill and interest to become ethnographers for every would-be research scientist to compile substantial corpora of material from their aid of books like *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*, and draw on the results when called somewhat utopian. Real research students, pressed for time and pushed to the limit linguistically, pasting from the bibliography, or working in a relationship of informal apprenticeship with (Hyland, 2002). It remains for writing teachers to make pragmatic decisions as to how much to trust to the shaping forces of the real discourse communities which their students aspire to.

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