

## Writing in University

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### Abstract

This article is a review of an online course on writing at the university level. It provides an overall summation of the chosen course based on the topics covered during the entire period of the course. As a conclusion, it provides a rounded opinion about the importance of such courses for non-native English speakers and writers.

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### 1. Introduction

This is a review of a course on writing English at the university level that is available on the Coursera platform. It is a beginner's level course. I completed close to 18 hours of coursework. This report is a compilation of my reflections, opinions, and learnings, about the course. I have given examples of my past writing experiences and exercises I have carried out separately, concerning a given aspect of writing. This report has been divided into weekly module headings and topic-wise sub-headings.

The following are the objectives of the course:

- To help compile a set of tools useful for academic writing, and to provide the platform to use these tools.
- To learn and apply the generic skills taught by the course to discipline-specific conventions of writing.

### 2. Contents

#### Week 1: Introduction to the Course

##### Structuring a Research Article

It is very well known that any essay has a three-part structure, namely an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. But a research article is not like a typical essay. Despite that, a research article follows the three-part segmentation. This three-part structure is represented with the abbreviation IMRaD, which stands for Introduction-Method-Results-and-Discussion. The Method and Results

section together constitute the body of the entire article. Finally, the Discussion section comprises the conclusion. This pattern of segmentation of a research article makes it easy to conceive it in light of the typical structure of an essay. The following table suggested by Glasman-Deal (2010) makes the division of the four sections in a research article very clear. The table suggests that the Results and Discussion sections can be clubbed together sometimes. But, more commonly, it is observed that the Discussion has to feature in the last part of the article, along with the Conclusion section.

Introduction			
Methods			
Results or Data Analysis	Results or Data Analysis	Results and Discussion	Results or Data Analysis
Discussion	Discussion	-	Discussion and Conclusion
Conclusion	-	Conclusion	-

Table 1: An illustration of the IMRaD Structure (Glasman-Deal, 2010).

### Process Writing: A Personal Anecdote

I learned the concept of process writing through this online course. But, it makes for a reasonable approach to writing, especially academic writing. If I were to categorize process writing, I would call it a descriptive approach. It characterizes the writing procedure in terms of the steps we usually follow for any kind of formal academic writing. Hence, it's a very reasonable approach.

When I was writing my Ph.D. proposal for the first time, I unknowingly followed the method suggested by process writing. The pre-writing stage or the invention stage was very long. There was a time when I was not even aware of the process. In other words, I collected a lot of information for my proposal quite so unknowingly. But, a purposeful search of the literature of my interest started close to four months before I put pen on paper. One of the significant techniques that I used in this stage was brainstorming. There was a time when I was searching for guidance from my senior and I also spent a lot of time thinking of various ideas and ways to implement my idea. Those were exciting times.

The writing stage was rather unorganized. Even though I was aware of the broad topics that I intended to cover, I did not follow any particular sequence of topics. Therefore, I think, the pre-writing stage overlapped with the writing stage. A lot of free-writing took place during the writing stage. Ideas were flowing out freely, but I purposefully tried to put those thoughts under a strict structure. Overall, I thought, the writing stage was quite unusual.

Overall, the rewriting stage was the most elaborate. After I completed my first draft of the write-up, I had sent it for a critical review to a senior, who very generously helped me out. Once I received the feedback, I tried collecting all the minor errors in writing. The most important suggestion turned out to be how to reorganize the presentation of my idea. I was surprised when I figured out that a modified version of the presentation was more appealing and academic-like. Surprisingly, the second draft was not even the final draft of the proposal that I submitted. Since there was a suggested word limit, I had to scale down my proposal. The entire process of rewriting took close to a month. Therefore, creating a distance from my writing helped me to see my writing in a different light. Lastly, I still think my second draft was my ideal work, despite the need to revise it.

### **Giving Feedback**

The only occasion I have come across to offer feedback is during certain peer-graded assignments for partial fulfillment of course criteria for courses on Coursera. When giving feedback, my overall concern was to review the broader idea behind the write-up. Of course, suggestions related to language, style, and logical organization of arguments were important to be provided. Every time I offered feedback, I tried starting with a positive acknowledgment of the write-up, even if the comment was very vague. Next, I tried listing the deficiencies in the write-up, all the while hoping that the critical comments would not be received as a personal attack on their writing.

### **Interesting Resources**

One of the links led me to 'Common Vocabulary Questions' on a site called lexico.com. It was rather interesting to find that in all of the English language there is only one word that rhymes with the word 'orange' and one word that rhymes with 'silver'. Moreover, both of these rhyming words are very uncommon in usage. It is easier to find words that par rhyme with them.

A new fact that I learned was that there are no words in the English language with the same letter three times in a row. In fact, in every potential case, the letters are divided by a hyphen. Also, surprisingly, snuck is the only word of that form that is considered to be a past tense of a word that ends with -eak. The more common past tense of the word sneak is 'sneaked'. The word 'snuck' has somehow snuck into the English language despite no precedence. These were interesting facts about the English language that I quite enjoyed knowing.

## **Week 2- Conveying Your Argument**

### **Structuring Information**

I found this topic rather useful. Structuring information in a write-up occurs quite unconsciously to me when I am writing with a flow. Therefore, being able to categorize each way of structuring gives me a certain kind of insight into how a given piece of writing has been organized. Some of the common ways of structuring information mentioned are as follows:

- General to specific
- Specific to general
- Problem-solution
- Sequence or chronology
- Cause and effect
- Comparison/contrast

It was also interesting to categorize a piece of my writing as one of the above ways of structuring. I chose to analyze a critical review that I had written a few days back. I noticed that each paragraph consisted of a different way of structuring, and this particular way would be confined to a specific paragraph. But, additionally, I noticed that the entire essay was following one of the above structures. So, it seems like a typical essay might be following such a nested structure when information needs to be organized coherently.

### **Structuring Paragraphs**

This section pointed out a very appropriate analogy regarding the usefulness of paragraphs. Paragraphs are like bricks that are arranged together to form a wall. Moreover, each paragraph consists of sentences. Each of these sentences plays the role of clay that is used to make the brick.

I find the organization of sentences in a paragraph very logical. Just like a piece of text, a paragraph also consists of a three-part structure. Usually, a sentence starts with a topic sentence. This is the most important sentence of a paragraph as it offers the main idea right at the beginning. The topic sentence plays a crucial role in guiding the direction of a paragraph, courtesy of the controlling idea which can be part of a topic sentence. The second part of a paragraph comprises supporting sentences. These sentences can be of various types, like explanations, definitions, causal analysis, examples, and so on. Supporting sentences provide flesh to a paragraph. Without the necessary explanations and examples, a topic sentence will not be able to stand on its own. Finally, a paragraph ends with a conclusion that can also serve as a transition to the next paragraph. It is important to note that both the supporting sentences and the conclusion must be concerning the topic sentence.

Even though a typical paragraph can be divided into three parts, not every paragraph follows the same structure. Sometimes, entire paragraphs are filled with examples or supporting sentences. Many times, topic sentences serve as an overarching idea for multiple paragraphs.

### **The Introduction (I in IMRaD)- The CARS Model**

The CARS model proposed by John Swales is a very good illustration of the funnel approach adopted to structure the Introduction section of a research article. The CARS model divides the Introduction section into three parts, as follows:

- 1) Establishing a territory- This can also be described as the situation or the context within which the study is situated. This can be demonstrated by stating why a general research area is interesting or worthy of investigation.
- 2) Establishing a niche- This step includes identifying the problem or the research gap.
- 3) Occupying the niche- This step is about announcing the way the study will contribute new knowledge as compared to previous research in the selected area.

I have not previously written a research article worthy of publishing. Hence, the above gives me a good sense of how to approach the Introduction section. If I were to evaluate this model, I think it is a very sensible way to approach writing the introduction. Just like a funnel, writing starts with a broad area of research. Of course, staying in a broad area will not serve the purpose of research as it needs to be specific enough to engage the scientific community. Hence, in the next step, the broad area needs to give way to a more specific interest area, which is like finding a niche for oneself. This niche is, usually, identified by going through previous research work and finding a gap in the literature that can be addressed, through whatever means, by using a certain methodology. Of course, since this is a scientific article, the conclusion of the paper also needs to be described in the introduction, at the third and final step. By addressing the conclusion, the article will capture the attention of the reader and urge him to read further the Method and the Result sections. Such an introduction seems like a whole rounded effort to develop or set up a well-informed platform to launch the reader into a more detailed discussion.

### **Week 3- How to use Available Information**

#### **Integrating Sources**

I am currently engaged in writing a concept paper, along with others, related to ‘bargaining’ in a social context. This is my first attempt at conducting secondary research after having started on my research journey. For the time being, we have come up with a concept note that completely captures the various stages of bargaining, starting from ‘identifying’ a bargaining opportunity to a resolution of the process of bargaining and the subsequent consequences. Moreover, we have enumerated the factors that potentially influence each of these stages.

A crucial distinction that I find between the concept paper and the other studies that I am involved in, which are experimental in nature, is the necessity to find evidence from existing literature to support each claim. In experimental work, it suffices to cite a handful of relevant works related to the research area. But, to write a concept paper, a lot more in-depth study of the literature needs to be done before finalizing the concept note. We need to find *relevant* and *recent* literature on bargaining that will help us put forward our concept note as a scholarly work worth publishing. The best approach would be to find primary research studies, experimental in nature, that substantiate each of the factors that we have enlisted. It is possible that through the process of finding evidence we might come across more factors that can potentially influence bargaining and its stages. If all such evidence and more are found, I would consider this piece of work satisfactory as we are letting prior research decide the gravity of concepts that we have identified.

### **Plagiarism and Referencing**

The section on plagiarism and referencing was very basic. The topics that were covered were broad and not deep. Therefore, there was very little learning for me. Moreover, the topic of plagiarism and referencing has become second nature to me. Nowadays, while writing any kind of text I make it a habit to cite others when there is scope. You will note that even this MOOC final report has a references section where I have listed the research articles I have cited in my report.

### **Week 4- Editing**

This section of the course was highly informative. It helped me discern the difference between editing and proofreading. Whereas editing can be both global and local, proofreading is always done locally for surface errors. While editing, the focus needs to be on the bigger picture where the following issues need to be kept in mind:

- Locating the thesis of the text. It should be placed at the end of the introduction paragraph.
- The content of the text needs to consider the knowledge level of the target audience. Background information and definition of terms need not be included in the text. Rather, new information needs to be focused on.
- Structure and organization of the text.
- Development of ideas in the correct order. In case of ideas seem like they are jumbled-up, reorganization needs to be done.
- Counter-arguments need to be addressed. It is important to either refute such counter-arguments or concede to them.

On the other hand, proofreading is about correcting typos, spelling, grammar, choice of words, and applying different word forms. Moreover, punctuation, formatting, and references also

need to be kept in mind. All of these changes are done locally. But, overall, proofreading is capable of maintaining the credibility of one's findings and ideas to the target audience.

The above tips are useful for a budding writer like me. I have edited and proofread my work before, but I did not know how to segregate the two tasks. The way I see it, the two can be done simultaneously, but it is important to know at what level the modifications are being made. This way, I will have greater clarity about the entire process of revision of a text. I, also, learned that a lot of time needs to be devoted to the purpose of revision and editing as that can improve the quality of any given text.

### **3. Conclusion**

My overall evaluation of the course is quite average. Even because it is a beginner's level course, I think it lacked proper organization in terms of content. It attempted to cover a lot of topics within a span of four weeks. But, it failed to go deeper into the topics that were covered.

Moreover, in the entire course, there was only one peer-graded assignment. Therefore, it does not appear to be a rigorous course for the students taking it up. I think the course is still evolving and the contents will also improve alongside. But, unless it reaches a level of rigorous practice and testing, I would not suggest this course to anyone else.

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