

“ASK THE PROFESSOR” about ... GOOD ACADEMIC WRITING

Pātai: (Question)

***Why do we HAVE to do 'academic writing'? It sounds boring to me.
And what is 'academic writing' anyway?***

Professor Alison Jones replies:

Ae, we have to if we want to be recognised by the wider research and scholarly communities – which we do! But 'doing' academic writing is not as bad as it sounds. Academic writing, as we will see, just follows a form of logic. And that form of logic is politically and intellectually **useful**.

Many of us get **intimidated** by the idea of 'doing' academic writing. But this is not because we can't write or think well. Few of us have difficulty writing to friends. And most of us find it easy enough to **talk** about our research or theoretical ideas, and to **argue** about these.

But we also know that '**what is in my head**' or 'my good ideas' **count for nothing** in an academic research environment unless they are written down. (There is a world of difference between having a chat about what you think and forming your ideas into a piece of writing that can be 'peer-reviewed' in order to be taken seriously – we will discuss the significance of *peer review* in a later issue of MAI Review).

There are good reasons for academic work needing to be in **written form**.

Research is about contesting ideas (**argument**), and about gathering **evidence** to support your argument. This evidence might be theoretical (it refers to ideas and arguments) or empirical (it refers to data) or both. In the western university tradition, if arguments and evidence are to be properly contested they have to be recorded in **writing** so that others can refer to them accurately. Writing therefore enables us as researchers to engage in careful communication with others. Academic writing is simply a formal way of engaging in **research conversations** with others in New Zealand and throughout the world.

Why does academic writing get such a bad rap?

... because a lot of it is so bad it's enough to put you to sleep (and maybe give you a nightmare). It is boring, full of jargon, and assumes we already know more than it tells us. We assume we must be stupid because we can't understand it but actually it is the writer who is often at fault. But one of the reasons we find some academic writing so **hard to read** is because it is **bad writing**. Many academics write badly. Don't ask me why. Maybe they think that if hardly anyone can understand them, they will seem to be smarter than everyone else? Or maybe they just can't write well. But you are going to be better than that.

Academic writing **can** be good writing. **What is good academic writing?** Good academic writing attempts to be **clear** to the reader and not vague, or overly flowery and metaphorical

(good academic writing acts to **teach** the reader). It relies on **evidence** and **argument** presented according to certain rules. If everybody is playing by the same rules, everybody knows what the game is. And it also shows itself to be **engaged** in an on-going conversation with the writing of others in the field.

Your writing will be good academic writing if it has these ten elements, seen from the point of view of the reader. The piece of writing ...

1. is shaped around **one clear question**, and explains what that question is from the outset
2. tells the reader **why** the question is important for the world to know about
3. accurately and thoroughly informs the reader **what has already been published** (or not) about this question or others related to it
4. provides **evidence** (data and/or argument) the reader finds convincing
5. tells the reader **how and why the particular evidence was collected**, and why particular theoretical arguments or **concepts** were used
6. is made up of **paragraphs**, and these contain only **one** point each (at the beginning of the paragraph)
7. indicates how **each** paragraph **addresses** the question. There are **no** 'bits' that are not shown to be relevant
8. considers **counter-arguments or counter-examples** where they are relevant
9. **sums up** its argument, evidence and its significance at the end
10. is **not rushed and tense**, but goes slowly and carefully, taking the reader along by the hand, meaning that the reader feels **alert but relaxed**.

We will discuss these elements in more detail in future issues of MAI Review.

Kia pai tō whakatuhituhi!

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