

# GETTING STARTED: ACADEMIC WRITING IN THE FIRST YEAR OF A UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

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**Abstract.** This contribution outlines some typical problems that university students face when they start to work on their first writing assignments and the pedagogical implications for the learning and teaching of academic writing. The paper starts with a case study showing some of the experiences of a student trying to write her first scholarly term paper. Without being taught to understand the differences between writing at the high school level and the university level, she runs into a number of problems that can be considered typical for this situation. In the second step, a description of the most important demands of academic writing will be given. It will be argued that the writing skills which meet these demands are substantially different from the writing skills required in high school, and that they must be taught at the university, not in high school, as they are inherently connected to the traditions, forms of thinking, modes of communication, and research methods of the academic world itself. The third part of the paper will draw conclusions for the learning of writing and will emphasise the idea that writing should be an integral part of university teaching programs and deserves considerably more attention as a research subject itself.

**Keywords:** Academic learning, Communication, Discourse communities, Knowledge production, Language conventions, Learning difficulties, Writing skills, and Writing socialization.

## 1 THE START: AN ILLUSTRATION

Johanna<sup>2</sup> begins her degree in Education at a German university. In her first semester, she takes a course on the topic of 'fatherhood'. The course is a 'Pro-seminar', meant to introduce students to academic discourse and teach them about scholarly presentation and discussion of research materials. To get her credit points, Johanna must give a summarising presentation of one of the subtopics of the course and write a term paper about it. As she never had writing problems in school, Johanna is opti-

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that Johanna is not a real person, but a fictional character. All descriptions of her behaviours and problems, however, have been taken from observations of real students in writing counselling.

mistic that she will successfully manage this task. She receives a reading list about her subtopic 'The role of the father in infant education', finds most of the titles in the library, and starts reading. The paper has to meet the criteria of academic texts, she has been told, and she has been provided with a style guide showing the accepted forms of quotations and references.

In high school, Johanna has learned to write narrative texts about her own experiences, interpretations of pictures and novels, and argumentative texts about political or ethical dilemmas. Though she never knew exactly how she managed successfully to write a text, she enjoyed writing. The process of writing itself has not been discussed in any of her classes, but she knows that it is useful to start out with a draft, then write a rough text, and finally rewrite it. She has learned that an outline is important, and that exact spelling, grammar and punctuation are necessary conditions for good grades. She has a tentative understanding of the fact that texts are an important key to knowledge, and she is looking forward to delving into deeper levels of knowledge in her university studies. Altogether, she has been quite well prepared for the learning tasks that await her.

When Johanna starts reading, she first opens the book that looks most authoritative to her. It is a two-volume book called 'Fathers', which contains a 200-page section about the role of fathers in infant education. While she reads this chapter, she starts to get discouraged. Dozens of empirical studies are summarised here and she is unable to think of a way to add anything to them. Is she meant to summarise the summary? Or even reread the original sources? She looks into one of the shorter articles on her reading list, which is obviously written by a feminist. Here she finds the results of a few empirical studies, followed by a critique of fathers, who, according to the author, do not participate in infant education in the same way and with equal intensity as mothers do. That sounds interesting, but how can she combine this article with the first book? Still different is the third article she opens about the history of fatherhood, which claims that fathers today spend significantly more time in infant education and in interaction with their children than they ever did before. Obviously, fathers have improved considerably over time, but how does this go together with the aforementioned paper?

Johanna goes back to the two-volume book and slowly moves through the critical 200 pages, fighting against fatigue and discouragement. She underlines almost every second sentence. When she tries to summarise what she has read, she is dissatisfied with her own text. She keeps rereading, trying to copy the phrases used in the original source, as her own wording doesn't sound scholarly to her. She rewrites her paragraphs several times without finding the proper style that would make them sound 'right'. None of the criteria she has learned so far of what the terms 'academic' or 'scholarly' could mean seem to apply to the task of designing a text. Writing, for the first time in her life, becomes painful.

By mid-semester, as the date of the oral presentation approaches, Johanna starts to get nervous. She has no idea which aspects of the topic she should choose for her speech. She has read most of the articles on the reading list and summarised some of them, but she has not written any ideas of her own. She starts writing her speech, but runs into a dead end after one and a half pages, not knowing what has gone wrong. With the help of a friend, she sorts out her thoughts and decides to reduce the pres-

entation mainly to a combination of the feminist and the historical article, which helps her to stay clear and concrete. To her surprise, she gets a positive feedback for her speech and her professor seems to be pleased about the vivid discussion that it gives rise to. Nobody seems to have noticed that she ignored a lot of the literature on the reading list.

After this experience, Johanna drops her work on the paper for a while. When she takes it up again she has to read most of the literature again. She decides that she would write short sections and collect useful quotations that she will then combine to make a coherent text. Summarising the texts continues to be a problem, as she never feels certain that her summaries are correct. Neither has she found a way to integrate her own opinion into the text. What she has written looks like a copy of the original, without anything of her own. Every time she uses the word 'I' she immediately feels that the sentence loses its power, so she adopts the impersonal 'one'. A large part of her struggle is connected with the selection of the right words, as she has found out that the terminologies of the texts differ significantly, and she never knows which term is the right one.

Despite these feelings, Johanna continues her work and writes many short pieces, which she then organises within a logical sounding outline. When brought into a coherent text and printed out, the result does, as Johanna notices to her surprise, have some of the 'academic' qualities that she was struggling for.

Some time after she has turned in her paper, she asks her professor about the result. She learns that the outline of her paper is not fully consistent, that her own opinion is missing, and that she has misunderstood some of the empirical research. Still, her professor likes the over-all approach of her paper, as she feels that a feminist position was a good addition to a pure academic treatment of the topic. Johanna receives credit for her work.

Though Johanna was relieved, she felt that she had not learned much about writing. She considered her work as a near-failure, for in view of the huge amount of time she had invested, the result seemed inadequate. She still did not know what a scholarly term paper is and what she could change next time in order to work more efficiently. Writing for her has started to become an arduous and stressful procedure without any personal significance, simply meant to fulfil her study assignments and to conform to the established academic standards.

## 2 THE TASK

Like Johanna, freshmen in German and probably most European universities start their careers as academic writers largely unprepared. Though they are usually fairly competent writers in sorts of text related to their recent school education and have enough general language ability to meet the challenges of academic writing, they run a great risk of failure if their learning is not supported by substantial writing instruction also at the university level. Let's have a look at what Johanna had to infer about academic writing instead of being taught:

- She had to produce a text but was not provided with any knowledge about what kind of text this should be. She did not know that she had to choose between

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