

Ken Hyland's essential bookshelf: Academic writing

Being asked to recommend a dozen key works on a specialist subject is much harder than it might seem. I decided on academic writing as this is something I know a bit about after a long career absorbed in it, but there are now too many books, papers, theses and unpublished studies for any individual to even approach making a comprehensive list. Google Scholar, for example, brings up a mere 5 million hits on the topic. There is also the issue that any selection probably says as much about the lister as the books listed. All our decisions reflect who we are and so the texts we include will be influenced by our experiences and ideas about what we think writing is, what we see as most interesting about it and how we believe it can be known. Any selection, then, is the outcome of a whole tangle of events in our lives that make us what we are and shape what we are likely to see as important.

This is, however, precisely the idea behind this series of articles in *Language Teaching*: authors are asked to bring their personal experiences and prejudices to recommend a shelf of books according to how they see the importance and significance of the texts. It seems only fair, then, to spell out my own bias from the beginning. This is a list guided by someone who sees writing as the outcome of activity rather than as activity itself: writing as a noun rather than a verb. Writing is neither simply personal expression or a display of well-formed sentences but is activity performed in a social context, which means seeing writing not just as language but as discourse.

What this means is that when we write we choose our words to connect with others and present our ideas in ways that make most sense to them, and we do this by using the words, structures and kinds of argument they will accept and understand. So writing is an attempt to achieve something while bearing readers in mind: it is the outcome of interactions with readers. In academic writing, then, this means taking on the ways of thinking and talking valued by disciplinary peers, supervisors, examiners and others. Studying this involves looking at both finished texts themselves and how they got that way. What are the disciplinary, social, professional, diachronic and other contextual factors which encouraged writers to produce such texts? This, then, is broadly what I see academic writing to be, and the titles I suggest here are those which, for me, best express this view

and its emergence as a central perspective on describing, researching and teaching academic writing.

I have limited my selection to books. There are, of course, any number of exceptionally brilliant and influential papers and chapters on the topic (e.g. Thompson & Thetla, 1995; Bloor, 1996). But books tend to have a longer use-by-date and greater influence over time (Hyland & Jiang, 2021) while also allowing their writers to more fully develop and support an idea. Books, then, tend to both launch and consolidate new perspectives and drive research in certain directions. I have also limited the selection to books dealing with ACADEMIC writing, thus sidelining numerous excellent titles on second language (L2) writing (e.g. Manchon & Matsuda, 2016; Casanave, 2017) and writing in general (Clark & Ivanic, 1997; Kress, 2003). Given these constraints, these are the sources that have been personally important for me and to which I continually return and recommend to others. They are organised under 4 headings for convenience, depending on whether the work is primarily focused on professional writing, student writing, the contexts surrounding writing or research methods, although there are plenty of overlaps and “leakage” between them.

Research on professional academic writing

This section contains just three items which are both important to me and offer diverse approaches.

1. Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: CUP.

In the summer of 1992 I was running a department at a small liberal arts college in New Zealand and casting about for a topic for a PhD study. I’d already written and rejected two unrelated proposals before a colleague advised me to read Swales. I did, and this book literally changed my life as it helped me to see important connections in academic writing and launched me on a lifetime of exploring genres, disciplines and concordance lines.

Its importance lies not so much in establishing the central role of genre in academic writing, for which it is probably best known, but in presenting a carefully thought through and comprehensive framework for describing academic texts. Together with Bazerman’s *Shaping written knowledge* (1988), Swales’ masterpiece helped push the fledgling field of

EAP towards disciplinary status. Here we find definitions and explorations of terms such as genre, discourse community, task and rhetorical consciousness raising, all of which are now commonplace in the everyday vocabulary of EAP. More than this, however, it pulls together linguistic and sociolinguistic theories to illuminate how writers create persuasive prose.

This, then, remains a classic resource. Not just an historical artefact of the evolution of academic writing research, but a book packed with insights which rewards contemporary study. The modern reader will, for example, find a powerful descriptive model of academic written genres which also illustrates how research on academic texts can be done and how the knowledge this produces can be usefully employed in the classroom.

2. Hyland, K. (2004). *Disciplinary discourses: Social interactions in academic writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

I decided to include this book in my essential library for two main reasons. First, it draws on and encapsulates a great deal of prior work in the sociology of science relating to the social construction of knowledge. It is in the work of Gilbert and Mulkay (1984), Latour and Woolgar (1979), Knorr-Cetina (1979) and others, for example, we see the importance of writing in scientific research as ‘the social justification of belief’ (Rorty, 1979: 170). Second, the volume seems to have stood the test of time, stacking up nearly 5,000 citations on *Google Scholar*. I suspect this is because it captured a mood which was turning away from seeing scholarly writing as an objective and impersonal form of discourse towards a view of it as a persuasive engagement with others.

Essentially the book explores how academics use language to organize their professional lives, carry out intellectual tasks, and reach agreement on what will count as knowledge. For readers today I think it continues to put into concrete form the theoretical ideas of the sociologists of knowledge by showing how writers make persuasive use of language. It helps readers to see that the linguistic features of academic texts are not merely regularities of style, but the ways writers in different disciplines acknowledge, construct and negotiate social relations. More than this, the book offers students numerous ways to explore texts for themselves using small corpora for traces of rhetorical interaction and illustrates how they might interpret the results they find there.

My aim in writing this book was to present a framework which analysts might use to understand the interactions between writers and readers in published academic texts, and it seems to have had some success in this. Moreover, the discussion of interactive features emerges in a more structured model of metadiscourse a few years later (Hyland, 2005).

3. Halliday, M. A. K. (2006). *The language of science. The Collected works vol 5. London: Bloomsbury.*

The inclusion of Michael Halliday in this library is a no-brainer. The greatest linguist of the 20th century, I clearly remember him accepting my invitation to speak at Hong Kong University where, approaching 90 years old, he stood at a lectern and, without notes or slides, held an audience of 300 enraptured for 2 hours.

He is best known for creating the internationally renowned systemic functional linguistics (SFL) model of language, but his genius encompasses an extraordinary range of fields, including scientific writing. Given Halliday's output on the topic, I feel justified in cheating here by picking an anthology as it allows me to include many of his chapters and articles on scientific English which have been so influential. The book, from the twelve-volume collected works edited by Jonathon Webster, contains his important paper on grammatical metaphor, or how science transforms actions into entities by 'regrammaticicising' experience as technical knowledge, and the power of scientific written English to create new ways of understanding the world. Almost every chapter reveals an important insight into scholarly writing.

I was never a hard-core functional linguist like many of my friends and contemporaries, but it is difficult to escape the impact of Halliday's work. Most centrally, his view that language is a semiotic system, or a resource for creating meanings, helps us see how, through various linguistic mechanisms, we construct robust worlds of disciplinary theories to create relationships, build communities and understand the world. This work, then, repays careful study today, providing contemporary readers with both a highly influential and comprehensive model of language and ideas for exploring academic texts.

Student academic writing

My selections so far favour published writing and, recognising that many readers will be seeking to build an essential library with other interests, this section includes books which relate to student writing in different ways. These focus on what students write, how they learn to write, and how they can be taught to write better.

4. Nesi, H. & Gardner, S. (2012). *Genres across the disciplines: student writing in higher education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Student genres have tended to take a back seat when it comes to the use of corpora to describe academic writing, so this book is a breath of fresh air as much as an important contribution to our understanding of what students write. Some papers based on the BAWE (British Academic Written English) corpus had appeared before this book was published, but here we see the huge ambition of the project. A detailed description of assessed writing in UK higher education across 30 disciplines from first year undergraduate to masters level, the volume maps the surprising number and range of genres students are asked to write, from essays to design proposals. It is an excellent example of what detailed corpus analyses can offer as well as a clear demonstration of the use of corpus techniques. I return to it again and again for information about student writing and the structure of written genres.

Perhaps the main innovation is the idea that student writing can be grouped into 13 “genre families”, each distinguished by its own organisational stages, purpose and networks with other genres. The ‘critique’ family, for example, is populated by genres which have the purpose of demonstrating an understanding of something and evaluate its significance such as the book review, product evaluation, book reports, website evaluations, and so on.

Even 10 years after its publication, the book remains relevant for researchers and practitioners. The authors’ use of Biber’s (1988) multifunction analysis and the genre work of scholars like Martin & Rose (2008), for example, offer analysts a way of researching these and other school genres in more detail by focusing on their shared purposes, key stages and salient features. It also encourages readers to explore the connections of genres as members of families and whether these hold for other texts. For teachers, the book shows how these genres vary across disciplines and stages of university life, and so

provides a way of reflecting on the genres they teach and a principled way to create a structured and coherent development programme for their students.

5. Tardy, C. (2016). *Beyond convention: genre innovation in academic writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Teachers using genre approaches in their classes have long been sensitive to the criticism that the method contains a “reproductive” element which risks creating a static, decontextualized pedagogy that can fail to acknowledge variation and choice in writing. When this happens, students might then regard genres as sets of rules, or what Freedman (1994: 46) once called “a recipe theory of genre.” I had myself discussed how genres can be repurposed for parody, satire or fraud and had even written on how celebrity authors had the authority to break from community norms to create an identity through their language choices (Hyland, 2008; 2010). Overall though, by describing the conventions which embody disciplinary ideologies and customs, I probably helped solidify them for teachers. Tardy is among the first to put genre innovation front and centre, engaging with the complexities of genre variation from theoretical and pedagogic standpoints.

Tardy argues that innovations are intentional decisions to depart from conventions and that these should be seen as part of genre knowledge. This allows us to distinguish innovation from transgression or unintentional error and encourages us to see innovation as a feature of reader reception rather than of a text. In academic writing, she says this is often used to make work stand out, subvert conventions, or present the writer’s individuality.

This book, then, is not another abstract and theoretical discussion of how our writing is imprisoned in the conventions of established genres. Instead it offers teachers ways to encourage students to vary and innovate their academic writing. Tardy’s discussions of word choice and use of modality, for example, are presented in the context of different classroom activities and contexts. She discusses the benefits and risks for creating novelty but also argues that it is generally the students who have demonstrated mastery of conventions who are granted the most rope. This is an interesting and accessible argument which inspires us to understand and embrace genre innovation.

6. Swales, J & Feak, C. (2012) *Academic writing for graduate students 3rd ed.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

It may seem odd to include a textbook when restricted to only 12 ‘must-have’ titles on my list, yet I’ve never thought of this book as ‘just’ a textbook. While it has all the trappings of one: tasks, examples, models, commentaries and a companion volume with ‘sample answers’, it is more than that. It also provides teachers and students with a coherent way of understanding academic writing as a network of connected genres and motivated language choices. This is a book which has had an enormous influence on me as a teacher, and I often draw on it for ideas or inspiration as well as recommend it to others.

The authors provide a model of how to use authentic textual data to raise students’ conscious awareness of language choices. Students are guided to apply their analytical skills to texts, developing an exploratory attitude towards language while fostering a comparative approach which reveals the social, relativistic nature of academic writing. Students can learn from each other and from the tasks by discussing the research findings in the text and sharing their own experiences. Many of us search for ways of engaging our students in learning, encouraging them to exercise their curiosity and use their analytical skills to better understand writing. This book, more than any other I know, provides advice on ways of doing this. Engineers and chemists don’t necessarily want to be discourse analysts, but the tasks in this book get students to question their views on language and see the rhetorical impact of different ways of presenting arguments.

This, then, is a book which encourages exploration and awareness rather than fixed rules and routines. I believe that it should be in the backpack of every university language teacher.

7. Johns, A.M. (1997) *Text, role and context.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

I’ve known Ann Johns for about 30 years, meeting at conferences and giving workshops together, and she is the most enthusiastic and creative advocate for teaching academic writing to secondary and undergraduate students I’ve ever met. She brings these same qualities of excitement and commitment to this slim volume, her only single authored book, which is packed full of ideas and good sense about the importance of community and context in learning to write. When I first read it, the connections between community,

learning and writing became much clearer and how students might be motivated to be what she calls “literacy researchers”.

Johns argues that learners acquire academic literacy in particular social contexts to develop a ‘socioliterate competence’ through the genres specific to those contexts. In this way writers, and readers, become part of communities which have their own rules and conventions for doing things, illustrating her argument with both academic and non-academic genres. Even after 25 years, this book gives teachers a fresh and creative perspective on teaching writing. Johns’ eclectic approach will resonate with teachers in many contexts as she outlines and explores tasks which ask students to draw on their experiences with genres to interpret and create texts within specific subject areas. She tries to encourage ‘an attitude of mind’ in students rather than get them to follow a particular path. What strikes you when reading this book, however, is that Johns strongly believes in what she says and has used these methods in classrooms herself.

This accessible and highly readable text constantly switches between theory and practice and remains a stimulating book for teachers who will find not just teaching ideas here but a thought-provoking attitude to writing. Beyond this, the examples of curriculum design and ways to implement them which appear in the last few chapters are as pioneering today as when they were first written. In sum, this book provides teachers with plenty to consider through a coherent framework for understanding academic writing and how it might best be taught. I recommend it to all EAP teachers.

Research on contexts of writing

The choices in this section also focus on academic texts but differ from those listed above in devoting more space to the processes of creating them. The selection concentrates on the working environments and pressures on writers. It situates writers in their physical, textual and institutional environments and the wider social practices which influence their writing and revising.

**8. Myers, G. (1990). *Writing biology: texts in the social construction of knowledge*.
Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.**

Greg Myers’ detailed analysis of the textual practices of biologists was an eye-opener to me when I first read it. Like Swales’ genre analysis, this book led me to the study of

academic texts for my PhD and persuaded me to focus on the discourse of biologists. Here was a science which valued elegant prose and graceful models over strings of formula and number-crunching. The strength of the book is that it captures what it is like to work in biology and how ‘scientific facts’ emerge in the process of writing, revising and responding to feedback from reviewers. With Myers help, I saw a discipline with a rhetoric close to the surface and relatively transparent social processes.

Myers comes at academic writing from a background in literary criticism and the sociology of science to devote detailed attention to the drafts and published versions of biologists’ writings. He begins with how grant proposals from two biologists are revised through feedback and resubmission to incorporate new ideas into the mainstream thinking of the discipline. He then turns to similar processes through the refereeing and revision processes of the same two experienced authors publishing research articles, interviewing the participants and analysing the texts themselves. He goes on to consider the exchanges in a scientific controversy and the changes introduced to transform scientific articles into popular science texts.

While Myers’ insights have been extended and developed in later research, few studies offer such a carefully documented and accessible argument. The work is on the list as an example of exemplary writing on academic discourse and as raising serious challenges to our assumptions about science writing. For those of us working in academic writing, it suggests an emic methodology which gets to the heart of what is involved in creating a successful scientific text.

9. Swales, J.M. (1998). *Other floors, other voices: A textography of a small university building*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum.

I remember a sense of astonishment when I first read this book. Where were the genre models and insightful text analyses that Swales was famous for? Instead, within the first 10 pages, we find numerous badly exposed black and white photographs of a car park, a freight elevator and a back staircase. These turn out, however, to be the setting for a remarkable exploration of the lives, cultures and texts of three communities occupying each of the floors of an apparently unexceptional building on the Michigan campus. A computer assistance site on the ground floor, the university herbarium on the first, and the

English Language institute on the top. Each small unit offering a different service and operating with different rhythms and texts.

With consummate skill, patient observation and affectionate detail, Swales traces the textual lives of the occupants of each floor, the ways they work and how texts mediate the complex interactions among individuals and networks. Using an approach he terms ‘textography’, he explores the production and circulation of routine writing activities in the building through interviews and analyses of specific written products. Most strikingly, the book reveals both the diversity of texts and their situatedness in these very different environments. Of particular interest is the distinct ‘defined rhythms of work’ of these communities which organise the pace at which texts are produced, distributed and made use of.

For contemporary readers, I believe this book will be no less revelatory than when I first read it. This fresh and illuminating way of understanding academic texts and the activities surrounding them encourages researchers to explore writing as an outcome of myriad interactions and social commitments – texts as the concrete instantiations of communities. The argument is a very powerful one and Swales view that “in discourse communities, communalities reside in what they do, rather than who they are” opens a clear line of research for all of us.

10. Hyland, K. & Jiang, F. K. (2019). *Academic discourse and global publishing: Disciplinary persuasion in changing times* London: Routledge

The contextual focus of this book is time. It uses corpus-based perspectives to explore how wider social and political events have influenced changes in the ways academic writers seek to persuade readers of their claims. The book was a joy to write as it is a genuine collaboration between one of my PhD students, Kevin Jiang, and myself, and emerged from my long desire to discover whether academic writing was becoming more informal. With Kevin shaving six months off his PhD, we had the time to create a diachronic corpus and write a paper which in turn encouraged us to go on and track how changes in research and publishing practices over the last 50 years have influenced academic writing.

The book suggests how key features of research articles have changed in response to the globalization of research and the marketisation of university life, creating a competitive

environment where writers are judged by the length of their publication lists. The period has seen a massive growth of collaboration and multiple authorship, the explosion of journals and dissertations, the fragmentation and specialization of research, the growing imperative to reach new audiences and sponsors and, most importantly, the increasing tyranny of metrics on authors. In short, the book attempts to link changes in language choices to the experiences of many researchers and teachers who work in universities.

I think there are two main reasons why I would recommend this for an essential bookshelf. First of all the book encourages us to expand our understanding of context beyond local or disciplinary boundaries to see it also as being time-bound. This can, I hope, help us to see how historical changes have rhetorical consequences. Second, it demonstrates a range of corpus techniques which can be used to reveal both diachronic language change and how features such as cohesion, stance, citation, lexical bundles, and so on are currently distributed.

Methodological approaches

In this final section I turn to two books which, in contrasting ways, describe and illustrate how academic writing might best be studied. While neither is a straight-ahead ‘how to’ book, both discuss different ways of approaching academic writing research and provide numerous examples of the focal method: ethnography and corpus analyses respectively.

11. Paltridge, B. Starfield, S., & Tardy, C. (2016) *Ethnographic perspectives on academic writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This work deserves more attention than it has received, a relative neglect perhaps resulting from the tensions and uncertainties around the term ‘ethnography’. I must admit that I’ve always been suspicious of the word. Having been to the small village hut where Malinowski lived for two years while studying the Trobriand islanders, the term often seemed rather overblown when used by applied linguists to describe a few interviews in a university office. Swales’ textography book opened my eyes to how the close study of the contexts in which texts are written can be a valuable means of understanding the social influences on language use and how individuals experience academic writing.

The key to these understandings is the immersion of the researcher in a particular milieu to conduct detailed and carefully described accounts of local writing cultures to

discover how writers understand them and the influence these have on what gets written. This is more than taking an 'emic' insider view, but means validating these against material, social and ideological conditions. It involves 'deep-theorising' as much as talking and watching. The authors explore a number of academic writing settings including those occupied by undergraduates, postgraduates and professionals, with varying degrees of attention given to the texts themselves. There is also a useful discussion of what this means to EAP teachers and classroom practice and research.

This, then, is a book which offers a valuable framework for studying texts in conjunction with what goes on around their creation and use and does so in a way like no other text I am aware of. It offers researchers a detailed and accessible account of how they might conduct similar studies and for this reason is on my bookshelf list.

12. Hyland, K. (2012). *Disciplinary identities: Individuality and community in academic discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

I am more than slightly embarrassed including another book of mine in this list, but feel it is a good example of what I want to conclude with: something that both explains the workings of a methodology and demonstrates its value in examining a novel aspect of academic writing. It is also a book I consider to be one of my best.

I had always been both fascinated and disappointed with accounts of identity. What I had read often seemed theoretically flimsy, seeing identity as something we changed constantly, like a t-shirt, and confusing it with self-presentation. Nor was I enamoured of the methods used to investigate it, which largely relied on subjects recounting stories about themselves to research assistants from the local university. I thought corpora could do better as they reveal repeated patterns of behaviour which have real consequences for writers and require endorsement by readers. I therefore argue that identity is created through discourses which construct relationships between the self and community, which I call PROXIMITY, and through relationships between the speaker and the message, or POSITIONING. Through analyses of academic homepages, acknowledgements, bios and research articles the book shows how people make discourse choices to express their similarity and differences to others.

I think the relevance of this book for researchers is that it shows how identity might be researched by studying writers' language choices. It promotes a certain view of identity as validated production and shows how corpora might be employed to reveal the ways individuals construct themselves and their groups through discourse. Language, as in all the books selected here, is central: a resource of disciplinary affiliation and professional recognition.

Closing reflections

The brevity of this list, and the limitations of my own knowledge, mean there are glaring gaps in coverage. While these are the books I would want washed up with me on a desert island after a shipwreck, they fall short of everything a newcomer to academic writing needs. I have included nothing on multimodal writing, assessment or digital genres, for example, and I can see the selection veers towards genre and discourse analytic approaches. However, as many of the books here argue, we are greatly influenced by the contexts in which we write and in which we have developed as writers. These are among my influences and for others they will be different. What is important, I think, is to read widely. It is also worth saying that we should not judge a text by its publication date. To understand academic writing, or any other field, means understanding the sources of current ideas and the arguments which inform them. In each of my choices I have tried to identify texts which not only impressed me, but which still have a lot to offer to contemporary readers. The books listed here then, both 'historical' and more recent, remain essential reading.

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