

Book Review

***Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills,*
John M. Swales and Christine B. Feak. 2012. Ann Arbor, MI:
University of Michigan Press
(418 pages).**

This is the third edition of a book that has enjoyed enormous popularity since it first appeared in 1994 with the sub-sub-title 'a Course for Nonnative Speakers of English.' Recognizing the challenge that the academic research paper (RP) poses for all graduate students regardless of language background (i.e., students from "Inner Circle, Outer Circle, Expanding Circle," contexts: Kachru. 2006) or academic discipline, the authors dropped that sub-title in the second edition (2004) in favor of the current one, more accurately reflecting this wider intended audience.

Despite the fact that this volume has been around in one form or another for over two decades, the book warrants a fresh look now for several reasons. First, as the authors point out in the Introduction to the Third Edition, since 2004 there have been a number of more recent developments affecting academic writing at the graduate level, including an increase in the use of e-mail, the internet and on-line graduate courses, new writing workshops for graduate students across all disciplines, the use of corpora for linguistic analysis, and the rise of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and the subsequent increase in the

spread of English-medium post-secondary programs in expanding circle countries. Secondly, as a result of these developments, applied linguistics has seen a rapid expansion of research on English for academic purposes (EAP), and particularly on the genres specific to academia, in the form of scholarly books, articles, theses, and dissertations. These developments are reflected in this most recent edition of *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*. Finally, while there have been numerous valiant attempts over the years to address the issue of academic writing, this volume remains the gold standard. What has made it a classic for over twenty years is, to my mind, the authors' ability to integrate genre analysis, the analysis of register, cohesion and coherence, and a functional approach to syntax.

The skeletal outline of all editions has remained essentially the same:

The general approach is analytical and rhetorical: Users are asked to apply their analytical skills to the discourses of their chosen disciplines and to explore how effective academic writing is achieved. (p. ix)

The book contains eight units and three appendices, plus a list of references and an index. The first four units are 'preparatory,' laying the groundwork for more genre-specific topics in later units. Unit One outlines the authors' approach to academic writing. Unit Two is devoted to general-specific vs. specific general texts, Unit Three deals with texts organized along problem-process-solution lines. Unit

Four describes ways to structure commentary on data (*e.g.*, qualification, strength and comparison of claims, how to present graphs and chronological data, *etc.*). Units Five and Six are dedicated to the writing of summaries and critiques, respectively. The final two chapters pull it all together under the titles “Constructing a Research Paper I” and “Constructing a Research Paper II.”

Each unit opens with a brief description of the specified topic, followed by sections on the content and rhetorical structure (*e.g.*, “The Structure of Data Commentary,” “Evaluating a Published Article,” “Creating a Research Space,” *etc.*), and sections focusing on the language used in those rhetorical structures. (*e.g.*, “Linking *as* Clauses,” “Unreal Conditionals,” “Purpose Statements and Tense,” *etc.*). All of this, more in the Third edition than I remember from previous ones, is interspersed with “Tasks” based on authentic data from academic writing drawn from a number of fields, requiring students to take stock of (and in many cases compare and contrast) the rhetorical structure, syntax and vocabulary of the RP across a range of disciplines.

Each of the three appendixes contains clear and detailed explanations of aspects of academic writing that tend to be problematic for graduate students. Appendix One deals with the grammar of definitions, including relative clauses and common ways to reduce them. Appendix Two presents an explanation of the use of articles in a research paper, including countability, generics and generalizations, and abstract vs. concrete generics.

Appendix Three lists Latin phrases, their literal meanings and modern usages. Like the main sections of the book, the appendixes also contain useful tasks for students.

In addition to containing many more student activities than earlier editions, older sample texts have been replaced with more current ones. This edition also contains more materials on science and the hard sciences than previous ones. It includes more up-to-date research findings and makes use of the Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student Papers (MICUSP). On the other hand, this edition does not deal in depth with abstracts nor with “free-standing literature reviews, writing introductions to term papers and other course work or writing applications” (p. xi).

Despite these omissions, Academic Writing for Graduate Students is a must read for both non-native and native English speaking graduates. And it should be emphasized that it is appropriate not just for students of applied linguistics. Anyone having to write a thesis or dissertation in English, regardless of major field, would benefit from this book. It would be most useful and appropriate for first year graduate students just embarking on their graduate studies, and could be used in a stand-alone course on academic writing or used selectively in another graduate level course to teach / reinforce the various formal feature of an academic research paper while also focusing on the content of the papers students read and write. I am currently selectively using sections of the book in just this latter way:

students are required to analyze both the structure as well as the content of the research articles on the course reading list. The hope is that, in this way students will both improve their own research paper writing and be able to read the research of others more critically. To date, they seem to enjoy this approach.

References

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