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Introduction

How do I know what I think till I see what I say.

E. M. Forster

How do I know what I'll say till I see what I think.

Anon.

This chapter is designed to help you think about how you fit in to the broad culture of academe and the kind of writing it asks for. It is about

- how to avoid procrastinating and how to discover a real desire or 'itch' to write
- how to gain a sense of confidence that you are making tangible progress with each piece of work you begin
- how to value your beliefs, prejudices, experiences and past learning as a springboard for producing considered, well-argued and adequately researched judgements
- how to relate in writing and in person with your audience – the tutors who examine your work, their expectations, academic traditions and foibles
- how, despite the difficulties, you can come to really enjoy using language to articulate your thoughts and ideas.

1 The main elements in academic writing

If we are to write well we need to know (as well as we can) what we are talking about. In order to find out what, precisely, we are talking about we need to write. Pushing ourselves to write will often reveal that we know more about a subject than we at first supposed; it should just as often reveal large gaps in our understanding of matters we thought ourselves fairly sure of. In writing we bring knowledge into being, we record and preserve it. Writing is the seed, the fruit and the pickle of our understanding.

Most people in the English-speaking world used to think that the student's and scholar's mind is an empty bucket to be filled by books, lectures and tutorials. Nowadays neuroscientists and psychologists tell us that the brain doesn't work in this passive, accepting manner. On the contrary, to learn and to write is, first, to make sense for ourselves of our new experience in terms of our old. So you need to be aware at the outset that, even to subjects you have never studied before, you can bring certain preconceptions, even prejudices, a certain amount of disjointed knowledge, and a certain facility with language – all of which can get you started. The most baffling of essay topics can soon yield some meaning if you take the initiative and begin to ASK QUESTIONS – of yourself, of the essay topic, of your books and lectures, of the school or department for whom you are writing the essay. To think of yourself as an active enquirer, rather than as a mere receptacle of ideas and knowledge or as a passive medium by which they are transmitted from your books to your essays, is essential to good essay-writing. Good academic writing actually *creates* new knowledge and new meaning.

Now there is no single *technique* by which this can be achieved. Rather, there seem to be four elements whose relationships with one another need to be balanced: the writer, the object of the analysis or discussion (the content), the reader, and the formal properties of the language itself. Not everybody will balance these elements in quite the same way; and this is as it should be, since there is no such thing as a uniform, ideal academic English. Getting the balance right will depend partly on how you, the writer, respond in

particular circumstances and partly on those traditions of expression and scholarship which grow up within certain disciplines, schools of thought within disciplines, and within particular college and university departments.

These four elements of the writing situation – writer, subject matter, reader and the forms of language – are reflected in four main characteristics of a piece of written language itself. They must all be handled together in the act of writing. Their competing claims to attention are resolved in the choice of one word in preference to another, in the structuring of a sentence, in the placing of an emphasis in the paragraph, in the confidence with which you argue your case, and so on. The four characteristics are these:

- Your own point of view must emerge, not as a mere opinion but as a *justified judgement*.
- You need to treat your subject matter as comprehensively and as precisely as the essay topic demands. From the range of information and ideas found in your reading you need to create a unified view. You must read carefully and do your best to make your language clarify the information and ideas you find in your books.
- You must present your work in the appropriate fashion for academic readers. This means that you will have to learn certain *conventions* of academic writing which are, at times, quite different from those you may be used to, or those you will find in non-academic contexts.
- Finally, the text of your essay needs to forge a coherent unity from the many diverse elements of language and thought that go to make it. It is in many of the details of your text that your purpose is realised. An essay is not merely a vehicle for ideas, but is itself (whatever the discipline) a piece of literature.

It is best to conceive of essay-writing as entering into a debate. You need to work out what your own answer to the essay question might be. You need to debate it with the books and other sources of

information and ideas you use. And then you need to convey the results of this engagement clearly to your reader, bearing in mind that the reader – because of what he or she already knows – needs to be convinced that your own answer is a reasonable one. Fundamental to this whole process is your use of language. This is the main evidence your tutors have to go on in making their assessment of your essay – just as you have mainly the evidence of language in your books to judge the usefulness and value of their authors' work to you.

The aim of this book is to show you how to fit together the elements introduced above, and to help you participate successfully in written academic debate. But first we shall examine each of our elements separately in a little more detail, beginning with that bane of all writers' lives – 'writer's block'.

2 You and your writing task

For most people writing is an extremely difficult task if they are trying to grapple in their language with new ideas and new ways of looking at them. Sitting down to write can be an agonising experience, which doesn't necessarily get easier with the passage of time and the accumulation of experience. For this reason you need to reflect upon and analyse your own reactions to the task of writing. That is to say, the task will become more manageable if you learn how to cope with your own particular ways of avoiding or putting off the moment when you start writing.

First of all, it is as well to be aware that this fear of writing is very widespread, and not only amongst students. The novelist Joseph Conrad describes his fear and lack of confidence in quite harrowing terms:

> I am not more vile than my neighbours but this disbelief in oneself is like a taint that spreads on everything one comes in contact with; on men, on things – on the very air one breathes. That's why one sometimes wishes to be a stone-breaker. There's no doubt about breaking a stone. But there's doubt, fear – a black horror, in every page one writes.

Just as the fear of writing is widely shared, even amongst successful writers, so are the frustrations of confronting the writing pad or computer screen. Bertrand Russell, one of the most accomplished and prolific of scholars and writers, has described in his autobiography how he would sit for days on end staring at his paper when he was working on the *Principia Mathematica*: 'it seemed quite likely that the whole of the rest of my life might be consumed in looking at that blank sheet of paper'. Russell had no 'method' to which he could turn to get him started.

If we could hazard a generalisation, it is this. Some degree of routine, of regular writing times alone by oneself, seems to be one ingredient that many writers find necessary. Even if nothing happens, it might be a good idea to sit out an allotted period before the pad or screen rather than go rushing off to the internet, the library or your friends in search of inspiration. Most books on study skills recommend drawing up some kind of timetable for your work, and even the most arbitrary of rules (like 500 words a day, even if all 500 have later to be scrapped or re-written) can serve a useful purpose. Many writers work like this. Others have more specific routines. The economist John Maynard Keynes worked in bed until lunch-time. By contrast, the novelist Graham Greene would get up each morning and start to write straightaway, before shaving, dressing or breakfasting. The solutions are as endless as the personalities, the family circumstances, the opportunities and the 'lifestyles' of the writers themselves. Only you can work these things out, with the help (as the acknowledgements pages of great numbers of books testify) of the people you live with.

Having said this, I hope I shall not be thought too inconsistent if I direct your attention to the historian E. H. Carr's excellent description of the way he works:

> **Laymen – that is to say, non-academic friends or friends from other academic disciplines – sometimes ask me how the historian goes to work when he writes history. The commonest assumption appears to be that the historian divides his work into two sharply distinguishable phases or periods. First, he spends a long preliminary period reading his sources and filling his notebooks with facts: then, when this is over, he puts away**

> his sources, takes out his notebooks and writes his books from beginning to end. This is to me an unconvincing and unplausible picture. For myself, as soon as I have got going on a few of what I take to be the capital sources, the itch becomes too strong and I begin to write – not necessarily the beginning, but somewhere, anywhere. Thereafter, reading and writing go on simultaneously. The writing is added to, subtracted from, reshaped, cancelled, as I go on reading. The reading is guided and directed and made fruitful by the writing: the more I write, the more I know what I am looking for, the better I understand the significance and relevance of what I find. Some historians probably do all this preliminary writing in their heads without using pen, paper or typewriter, just as some people play chess in their heads without recourse to board and chessmen: this is a talent which I envy, but cannot emulate. But I am convinced that, for any historian worth the name, the two processes of what economists call 'input' and 'output' go on simultaneously and are, in practice, parts of a single process.

It seems to me that the procedure Carr describes – reading a bit, writing when the itch comes, reading further and then re-writing – is worth taking seriously because it changes the nature of the problem from one concerned vaguely and generally with the act of writing to the more manageable one of writing *something*. The critical phase of the Carr cycle is getting the 'itch' to write, and for this there is indeed no generally applicable nettle. It is, I suppose, dependent in the first instance on becoming *interested* in what you are reading. And becoming interested in that, as we shall see in chapter 2, is partly dependent on how well you ask your questions and on that part of you that you bring to choosing the essay topic in the first place.

Think, then, of the times when something in a book has caught your attention sufficiently to make you insert an asterisk or underline the words. You may have been stimulated to make a marginal note or a note on a sheet of paper. This is the important moment. Here is the first faint itch. Instead of covering it over with salve and a book mark, begin to sharpen your ideas on it immediately. Even half a page which manages to deal in some way with the point and take in a few snatches of your other reading will suffice for a nucleus to be worked on later.

(This, to my mind, is the single greatest benefit of word-processing programs.) Writing begets writing. As Goethe writes in the Prelude to *Faust*:

> **Only engage, and then the mind grows heated –**
> **Begin it, and the work will be completed!**

If you do this from time to time, your mind will be working constructively on the essay (even in periods off duty) and your attention will be shifted from the act to the matter when you come to write the essay as a whole. You will also have spread the load of facing that empty computer screen over many smaller, and more easily handled, instances.

There is, too, the role of discussion. Discussion is an essential part of academic work both as an informal preparation for writing and as writing's final justification. The coffee shop and the seminar room, while quite distinct, are essential to the architecture of academe. But although the autocrats of the coffee table do not necessarily deserve a good hearing in the seminar room, they are at least preparing themselves for one asset of the business of writing – trying out and building up confidence in the phrases and arguments that will later be written down. If you feel you lack confidence you might be tempted to shirk these discussions in favour of solitary thinking. It is better not to. Informal discussion with friends, fellow students and others on the internet is an important preparation and a foil for the necessarily individual and solitary business of writing.

3 You and your subject matter

Whilst nearly everybody suffers to some degree from 'writer's block', we tend to vary in our ability to handle the four major elements of the writing process itself. We have seen that a good piece of academic writing needs to achieve a certain balance between these elements. So what you need to do in order to help you achieve this balance is to decide which of the elements you need to work at most. You might need to give most attention to establishing your own point of view

on the topic – or finding your 'voice' – and feeling able to hold to it with some degree of confidence. Or you might find manipulating your language to get it to say something sensible without too many hits on the delete key is the big problem. It could be that you find the main difficulty to be in structuring the essay in a coherent fashion out of the wads of notes you have taken, in being able to develop your ideas to 'fill up' the 2,000 or 3,000 words required or, conversely, to cut down your 4,000 words to the required length. And then you might be so worried about 'what they [the tutors] want' that you devote enormous amounts of energy to pleasing the reader and being unnecessarily meticulous in the conventional presentation of your work.

This list of common difficulties does not exhaust the possibilities. Furthermore, overcoming one of them might also require attention to one or two of the others. So, while the list does oversimplify somewhat, it is a good idea at this early stage to decide which of the writing problems apply most particularly to you. By identifying as well as you can your own strengths and weaknesses, you will be in a position to make the best use of this book.

We turn now to the problems of coming to terms with the subject matter in such a way that you will be able to develop confidence in establishing your own answer to the essay question.

The first, and perhaps most important, thing to bear in mind is that your tutor is not expecting in your essay the 'right' or the 'correct' answer to the question. It might be the case that there is a 'right' answer, but it is not likely that all of your tutors are going to be in complete agreement among themselves on what it is. Hence your job is not to find the right answer in the books, nor to find out what your tutor thinks is the right answer, but rather to use books and tutors to help you establish *your best answer*. This demands that you learn to exercise your faculty of judgement and to be as clear and explicit as you can about how you form your own judgements.

It is the manner in which we exercise this faculty of judgement that distinguishes academic enquiry at its best from much of the everyday writing we see around us. Much of your learning so far will have required you to produce accurate and coherent descriptions of things you have observed, things you have read and things

you have been taught about. The questions, for the most part, have been raised by your teachers and your books. Now, these aspects of learning remain important in colleges and universities. But what may be new to you is the increasing responsibility thrust upon you to ask your own questions and to ANALYSE or DISCUSS (rather than just to describe) the objects of your enquiries and the statements that may be made about them. We begin to discover, for example, that what we had taken to be well-accepted facts about the world have an aura of uncertainty about them; they may turn out to be theories, interpretations or widely held beliefs rather than rock-solid 'facts'. We may discover, too, that facts about which there may be no serious debate can nevertheless have their importance valued or weighted differently by different authors or as a result of asking different questions. Such situations call for analysis and discussion, in which your own evaluations will become increasingly explicit, and in which descriptions, though present, play only a part. Two of the more common comments written by tutors on students' essays are 'Too descriptive' and 'Needs more analysis'.

Now, it is important to be quite clear about the nature of this process of judgement. It is not uncommon to see a student write 'In my opinion . . .', and a tutor write beside it 'We don't want your opinion.' Although this might seem to contradict what was said above about the importance of your own judgement, it does not. What the tutor is objecting to is 'opinion' unsupported by reason and evidence.

In chapter 2 we shall examine closely how, when you are first coming to grips with an essay topic, it is quite necessary to decide what your provisional opinion might be. Your opinion at this early stage of your work does not need to be justified at all. It can, as the philosopher Sir Karl Popper says, be no more than a 'prejudice' or a 'conjecture'. You *must* bring your prejudices and opinions to bear on your provisional answer to the question. But, by the time your reading and your writing are finished, prejudice and opinion must have been converted into a reasoned judgement, which might be significantly different from your initial reaction to the essay topic. We can see how initial prejudice and opinion are transformed into judgement on a broad scale in this memoir by the Australian historian Manning Clark:

> I happened to have the good fortune to experience in childhood all the conflicts which were central to the human situation in Australia. My mother came from the old patrician, landed magnificoes in Australia; my father from the working class first of London, then of Sydney. So, years later when I read those words by Karl Marx, 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles', childhood memories made me say 'and that's true, too' just as years of reading and observation later were to fill in the details for that proposition about human society and raise doubts about what it leaves out.

Clark announces his prejudice in favour of Marx's dictum, a point of view governed by his own childhood experience and not by any academic method. That prejudice is absolutely necessary to Clark's history, but by itself it is not enough. It must be complemented by 'reading and observation' expressed in a critical academic discourse which analyses the 'details' and comes to terms with the 'doubts'.

In beginning with our prejudices and opinions and then gradually converting them through reading and writing into considered judgements, we are committing a great deal of our own selves to the answer we give. We must be prepared to mean what we say. But we must also be able to feel a certain *confidence* in our judgements. This confidence does not come so much from 'within' us as from the success with which our language formulates the judgement and backs it up. If you find it extremely difficult to get words onto the page, then what is probably at fault is your understanding of what you are trying to say or an insufficiently worked-out argument to support it. This can only be overcome by going back to your books or by forcing yourself to clarify your point of view by writing a short summary of it.

We have noticed above the need to take care that we mean what we say. But we must similarly take care, as the March Hare and the 'Mad' Hatter crossly pointed out to Alice, to say what we mean. There can be a yawning gulf between the two into which most of us can easily fall. When we have put our thoughts and judgements into