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Teaching Academic Writing in Higher Education English Classes: Approaches, Design, and Assessment

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Abstract: This article synthesizes research-informed principles for teaching English academic writing in higher education. It outlines what makes academic writing distinctive (audience, purpose, stance, evidence, and organization), compares leading pedagogical approaches (product, process, genre, communicative, and process-genre), and translates them into actionable course design. The paper also addresses technology integration (collaborative editors, corpora, and AI), common learner challenges with evidence-based remedies, and assessment with high-leverage feedback practices. The goal is a coherent, adaptable model instructors can apply across disciplines and proficiency levels.

Keys words: academic writing, higher education, process approach, genre pedagogy, feedback, assessment, AI in writing, EAP

Introduction. Academic writing is not merely a language skill; it is a gateway to disciplinary membership. It enables students to synthesize literature, articulate arguments, report empirical findings, and participate in scholarly conversations. In higher education settings-especially where English functions as a medium of instruction or publication-writing competence correlates with course performance, research productivity, and professional mobility. Importantly, writing also cultivates transferable capacities: critical reading of sources, argument construction, and audience-aware communication.

Treat writing as both cognitive problem-solving and social participation.

Align tasks with authentic academic genres students will meet (e.g., lab reports, literature reviews, research proposals, reflective memos, policy briefs).

Build explicit bridges from language form to disciplinary thinking (e.g., how tense choices signal stance in literature reviews, how hedging negotiates claims in discussion sections).

Effective academic writing typically features. Audience & Purpose: A clearly defined scholarly reader and communicative goal (to analyze, argue, report, synthesize). Argument & Evidence: Claims supported by credible sources, data displays, and transparent methods. Conventional macro-structures (IMRaD, problem–solution, claim–evidence–warrant), and micro-cohesion (topic sentences, logical connectors, lexical cohesion).

Stance & Voice: Disciplined use of hedging, boosters, self-mentions, and evaluative adjectives to position the writer in relation to sources. Style & Accuracy: Formal register, nominalizations where appropriate, discipline-specific phraseology, and attention to sentence-level clarity and accuracy. A curriculum that surfaces these features explicitly—through models, guided analysis, and targeted

practice—accelerates learning.

Focuses on accurate replication of well-formed texts. Strengths: clarity about expectations, useful for controlled practice. Limitations: can marginalize idea development and revision, and may underplay audience/purpose.

Frames writing as recursive stages: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Strengths: fosters fluency, metacognition, and resilience; centers feedback cycles. Limitations: if used alone, may leave disciplinary conventions under-specified.

Makes rhetorical moves and disciplinary conventions explicit (e.g., Swalesian "moves," Hyland's stance/engagement features). Strengths: demystifies expectations and improves transfer across tasks. Limitations: risks being prescriptive without space for voice and iteration.

Designs writing as purposeful communication for real or simulated audiences (peer readers, community partners, journal mock-reviews). Strengths: boosts motivation and audience awareness. Limitations: needs scaffolding to ensure formal accuracy and genre fit.

Combine process (for fluency, drafting, feedback) with genre (for rhetorical clarity) under communicative conditions (realistic audiences and purposes). In practice: analyze mentor texts → plan moves → draft → receive peer/instructor feedback → revise for audience needs → edit for accuracy → publish (class journal, conference poster session, blog, or repository).

Outcomes: e.g., "Students can write a 1,800–2,500-word literature review that synthesizes 15 peer-reviewed sources, uses discipline-appropriate stance, and applies APA/MLA consistently."

Assessments. capstone paper + annotated bibliography + oral defense + process portfolio.

Learning sequence: weekly genre-move workshops, reading-to-write tasks, drafting studios, and revision labs.

Week 1–2: Academic integrity; reading-to-write; paraphrase, summary, and citation; move analysis of model texts.

Week 3–4: Argument building; claim–evidence–warrant; paragraph architecture (TEAL/PEEL); cohesion devices.

Week 5–6: Stance & hedging; reporting verbs; synthesis matrices; Annotated Bibliography due.

Week 7–8: Macro-organization of literature reviews/reports; visualizing structure with reverse outlines. Draft 1 due.

Week 9: Peer review workshop; revision strategies; coherence diagnostics.

Week 10: Style & clarity; sentence combining; nominalization control; information flow (theme–rheme).

Week 11: Editing clinic (grammar, punctuation); referencing systems. Draft 2 due.

Week 12: Final polishing; cover memo reflecting on revisions. Portfolio due.

Mentor-text walkthroughs: Identify moves, stance markers, and cohesive devices.

Synthesis matrix: Rows = sources; columns = themes/variables/claims; culminates in thematic synthesis paragraphs.

Reverse outline: Margin notes that restate each paragraph's main point → diagnose logic and redundancy.

Color-coding for cohesion: Topic sentences (blue), evidence (green), analysis (orange), link/transition (purple).

Cover memos: Students attach a 150-word note stating goals, concerns, and revision requests—guides

targeted feedback.

Google Docs/Microsoft 365 enable synchronous drafting, version history for process assessment, and structured peer review with comment tags (e.g., Claim, Evidence, Style).

Use learner corpora and discipline-specific corpora (e.g., BAWE, COCA) to notice collocations, reporting verbs, and phrase frames ("This study aims to…", "findings suggest that…"). Concordancing tasks help students replace vague lexis with field-appropriate phraseology.

Use cases: brainstorming, outlining, audience re-framing, tone diagnostics, grammar checks, and revision suggestions.

Pedagogical rules: require transparency (AI-use statements), insist on human revision with evidence of changes, and assess process artifacts (notes, matrices, drafts) to protect learning and integrity.

Critical literacy: teach students to evaluate AI output (fact-checking, bias, source attributions), and to maintain authorial voice.

Assessment design: emphasize tasks AI cannot fully replace—data commentary on course-generated results, discipline-specific applications, oral defenses, and iterative portfolios.

Limited idea development Reading load too light; sources not synthesized Expand reading-to-write tasks; synthesis matrix; debate → write activities

Weak organization Unclear rhetorical plan Reverse outlines; paragraph frames (PEEL/TEAL); genre move checklists

Source use issues (patchwriting, over-quote) Paraphrase skills underdeveloped Micro-lessons on paraphrase strategies; side-by-side drafts; citation games

Sentence-level accuracy L1 transfer, fossilized patterns Focused grammar feedback on 2–3 patterns per cycle; editing logs; targeted drills drawn from students' own errors

Cohesion and flow Missing topic sentences / logical connectors Color-coded drafting; transition inventories; lexical chains tasks

Stance & hedging Over-assertion or excessive caution Reporting-verb ladders; hedging workshops; imitate-then-vary exercises

Procrastination & anxiety Perfectionism, time-management gaps Milestoned deadlines; low-stakes drafting; cover memos; affirming feedback culture

Two cross-cutting strategies are especially powerful: (1) Frequent low-stakes writing to build fluency (reading responses, mini-abstracts, figure captions), and (2) Visible revision—students submit drafts with tracked changes and a brief rationale for their revisions.

Adopt a dual focus on product and process. Weight the final paper, but also grade process artifacts (proposal, annotated bibliography, draft 1, peer-review quality, revision memo). This aligns incentives with learning.

Use analytic rubrics with 4–6 criteria: (1) Task fulfillment/genre moves, (2) Organization & coherence, (3) Use of sources & citation, (4) Argumentation/analysis, (5) Language & style, (6) Editing/proofing. Share exemplars for each band; conduct norming with students so criteria become "owned," not mysterious.

Prioritize, don't carpet-bomb. Focus each cycle on a small set of global issues; delay micro-corrections until later drafts.

Make feedback actionable. Replace "be clearer" with targeted prompts: "Underline the claim; add one piece of data; tie it back to your research question."

Balance critique with affirmation. Name what is working (structure, a clear operational definition, a deft

hedge) to preserve voice and motivation.

Use multiple modalities. Margin comments for local issues, end notes for global ones; occasional audio/video feedback for tone and clarity; in-class micro-conferences to co-plan revisions.

Close the loop. Require a revision memo explaining what feedback they acted on and why; grade the quality of revision, not just the end text.

Combine instruction (paraphrase training, citation fluency), design (unique prompts tied to class readings/data), and verification (process artifacts, oral defenses). When AI is permitted, require a short AI-use disclosure and emphasize human authorship and accountability.

Conclusion. Teaching academic writing in higher education works best when we blend the strengths of multiple approaches. A process-genre, communicative model—anchored in authentic academic tasks, explicit modeling of rhetorical moves, iterative drafting, and high-quality feedback—consistently builds students' fluency, accuracy, and disciplinary voice. Technology, including AI, can amplify these gains when used transparently and critically. Ultimately, writing pedagogy should help students do more than produce correct sentences: it should induct them into the habits of mind and discourse practices that define scholarly work.

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