

# How Scholars Write

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## PREFACE

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We begin this book with a problem: we set out to write a straightforward, linear guide to something that is neither straightforward nor linear—academic writing. Some years ago, this problem came alive for us when we began talking about the gaps between how we taught our students to write and how we approached our own writing. While we taught our students rather formulaic strategies that would approximate academic writing—find a controversy you’re passionate about; take a strong stand; place a thesis statement in your introduction; begin paragraphs with topic sentences—we seldom use those strategies in our own projects. We instead start our research with questions sparked by reading others’ research; we think about crafting responses to those questions that move the larger scholarly conversation forward; we look for gaps and complications. We wondered if our students experienced academic writing as we do: creative, exploratory, and often exciting. Since those early conversations, we have worked on teaching writing and research in ways that are less mystified and more real.

So we set out to write a guide that introduces academic writers—undergraduates, graduate students, and other researchers—to the often surprising realities of how seasoned scholars research and write. Though the book contains a fair amount of practical advice, this is not an advice book. Merely describing what works for *us* would capture only our personal preferences or idiosyncrasies. Instead, our project here is to present a transparent, principled, research-based description of how

scholars actually get things written. We offer here not unbreakable rules but a mindset, not formulas but tools and techniques.

To fulfill this project, we looked to research in writing studies, cognitive psychology, educational psychology, and applied linguistics to answer questions such as, “How do scholars come up with ideas?” and “How do researchers read their sources?” We also invited a host of published researchers to describe how they approach their writing. You’ll find narratives from scholars in neurobiology, writing studies, law, literary studies, media studies, library science, music, engineering, and creative nonfiction. Together, these voices suggest the ways that people can read and write themselves into belonging in a scholarly community.

We’ve divided each chapter into two sections:

*Mindset:* The first section of each chapter explains how researchers think through various challenges. We offer here the principles, attitudes, and approaches that scholars bring to their research.

*Tools & Techniques:* The second part of each chapter presents practical strategies that researchers use at various stages of academic writing. We describe scholars’ reading methods, research techniques, and writing practices that you can apply to your own projects.

Each chapter also includes the following features that take you inside scholars’ writing practices:

*A Scholar’s Story:* These short narratives highlight expert researchers’ own experiences when tackling common challenges in the research process. You’ll see that research can be humbling, maddening, and revelatory even for the experts. These stories illustrate the ways that professional scholars use the same strategies we describe.

*Key Terms:* We define the words that describe the sometimes difficult to identify but crucial concepts and components that drive academic writing.

*Practice:* Throughout the book, we offer quick exercises for readers to practice honing the skills we describe.

*Research on Writing.* We highlight research in the fields of writing studies, rhetoric, psychology, and linguistics to explain the ideas that inform scholars’ approaches to writing, research, and thinking. Each includes a takeaway, showing how you might apply the research to your own writing.

*Myth vs. Reality.* This feature dispels common misperceptions about writing—misperceptions that can inhibit your ability to move forward, such as “A thesis statement must be one sentence long,” “It’s always inappropriate to use ‘I,’” and “Researchers start with a claim.”

*Common Pitfalls:* We describe typical ways that research can go wrong, and we share strategies that scholars use to avoid these pitfalls.

*Time Savers:* This feature offer tricks and tools scholars use to avoid wasting time with unfocused or inefficient work.

*Turn to Your Research:* Chapters end with a feature that prompts you to apply concepts and strategies to your own research project.

Writers who are newer to academic research may find the gap between their own writing and published writing daunting. Published writing often appears to present brilliant thinking with ease. However, during the writing process, the scholars who publish are themselves learning, experimenting, writing and rewriting (and rewriting some more), asking for help, and sometimes running into road blocks. This book is our effort to take you behind the scenes of scholars’ writing in order to dispel the notion that only people born brilliant can be academic writers. Rather, successful scholars practice principled strategies that anyone can adopt in order to craft academic writing that matters.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**D**on't let the cover of this book fool you. While it lists just two authors, many people contributed their wisdom and effort. These acknowledgments reflect the advice we give in the book, which is to seek out many perspectives that challenge us to complicate thinking and clarify writing. We're fortunate to have a generous community in which to do that.

Our closest collaborator was Shyanne Figueroa Bennett. As our research assistant, Shyanne read every word of this manuscript multiple times and helped us not only catch mistakes but sharpen our explanations. We relied on her keen-eyed notes in the margins to better envision how readers would experience each chapter. In future years, we look forward to reading books with her name on the cover.

Our thinking about writing and teaching has been shaped in profound ways by our colleagues in the Columbia University Undergraduate Writing Program—Nicole Wallack, Glenn Michael Gordon, and Jason Ueda—whose thoughts have helped shape this book, likely in more ways than they realize. We hope that the pages that follow capture some of the wisdom and compassion they bring to their work every day.

Throughout this process, we have also relied on Undergraduate Writing Program colleagues to read chapter drafts and talk through the challenges of putting slippery concepts into accessible language. Thank you to Allen Durgin, Vanessa Guida, Valerie Seiling Jacobs, Xander Landfair, Simon Porzak, Abby Rabinowitz, Hal Sundt, Avia Tadmor,

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