

# Helping students develop their writing skills – A resource for lecturers

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## Abstract

Students need well developed writing skills to help them master new concepts and ideas and to document and demonstrate their learning. In addition, effective writing is valued and demanded by employers. However, feedback from students, lecturers and employers shows that many students do not have well-developed writing skills and are, as a result, disadvantaged as learners and as future graduates seeking work in a competitive marketplace. Thus, students need help to develop their writing skills. Current theory and research suggests that such help is most effective when it is provided by the discipline lecturer in the context of subject learning. Therefore, all lecturers, irrespective of their discipline, need to take responsibility for helping their students to develop writing skills.

In this paper, we outline the importance of effective writing for students and graduates and describe the outcome of a CUTSD project – a to help lecturers across the disciplines help their students develop their writing skills. We outline the rationale and philosophy underpinning the design of the book, present feedback from students and lecturers who trialled the activities and strategies included in the book, suggest how lecturers can use the book and reflect on empowering lecturers to help their students develop writing skills for learning and for life.

## Writing, learning and employment

All students need well-developed writing skills. Being able to write effectively is important because writing contributes to learning and understanding of new subject matter and provides a means of documenting and demonstrating what has been learned. Writing as part of learning, allows students to think about and make sense of new knowledge and ideas. Students who have well developed writing skills can engage actively in learning through note-making, summarising, expository writing, journalling, keeping a learning log, etc. On the other hand, students with poorly developed writing skills are at a disadvantage in mastering the subject and in demonstrating what they have learned.

Further, most professions require good communication skills including the ability to write effectively for different audiences. Thus, well-developed writing skills are valued and demanded by professional and employer groups who recognise effective writing as essential for success in the workplace.

Comments from lecturers suggests that many are not happy with the quality of their students' writing skills. Such complaints are voiced about students at both undergraduate (Bate & Sharpe, 1990; Cowen, 1993) and postgraduate levels (Torrance, Thomas & Robinson, 1992; 1994) and are growing with the increased diversity of the student body. Although there is an ongoing debate as to whether the 'literacy' skills of school leavers are improving, declining or remaining static, there is general agreement that the expectations for higher levels of these

skills are growing in university courses and as career and work demands change and become more complex (Radloff & Samson, 1990; ACNielsen, 2000).

In addition, current feedback from employers suggests that a large number are dissatisfied with the writing skills of many graduates and that some graduates miss out on employment as a result of poor literacy skills, as illustrated in the quotes below.

They come out with a lot of academic theory but can't present, they can't write, they don't understand what business is about. While they are made to present assignments at university, they are not actually taught how to do them (ACNielsen, 1998, p. 22).

Many graduates appear to miss out on job opportunities because of lack of basic skills such as literacy...If there is dissatisfaction with graduate skills as such, it probably lies in the area of written communication...(ACNielsen, 2000, p. 9).

## Supporting student writing

Students need help to develop and use their writing skills throughout their study. Typically, such help – when it is available – has been most commonly offered as an extra 'add on' or adjunct to regular course work rather than as an integral part of subject learning (Latchem et al., 1994). Moreover, often the approach adopted is remedial and assumes a deficit model of writing development (Biggs & Moore, 1993). As a result, students and lecturers may perceive such courses as less relevant or important than the major discipline study area, as 'remedial', and only for students who are 'deficient' and need to be 'fixed up'. Often these courses are 'generic' and focus on discrete skills such as grammar and spelling that are least likely to lead to writing proficiency (Hillocks, 1986). There is also evidence that such courses, because of their very nature, may not help students to develop discipline-specific writing skills (Colomb, 1988; Radloff & Zadnik, 1995).

General how-to-write courses are not the answer, as they are usually taught for all writers irrespective of content. Thus, writing has then to be taught in a generalised content-free way, which means focusing on spelling, grammar, orthographics and vague all-purpose structures. Certainly, general hints and tips can be helpful, but they are really only the icing on the cake...to teach 'content-free' writing techniques inevitably draws attention away from the main ideas and themes, focusing it on mechanics (Biggs & Moore, 1993, p. 368).

In our experience, students are rarely provided with support or instruction in how to write by lecturers who sets the writing tasks. As a result, many students struggle with writing tasks and fail to develop the competence and confidence needed to be effective writers. Confronted by students who have poor writing skills, lecturers may resort to blaming students for their writing deficiencies or avoid setting writing tasks altogether.

However, as Russell (1990) suggests, instead of blaming students for their poor writing, lecturers should support them to develop their skills. The support role of lecturers is especially critical given that they are the dominant influence on the quality of students' educational experience and, therefore, their attitudes and practices have direct bearing on the development of students' writing skills (Young & Fulwiler, 1986).

If students' writing skills are to be enhanced, lecturers need to devote more time to supporting writing in the context of learning the subject (Hattie, Biggs & Purdie, 1996; Holliday, 1992). Developing writing skills requires intensive practice with timely and appropriate feedback. This means that students need to engage in regular writing activities that are discipline specific and integrated into their course of study. Lecturers are best placed to introduce students to the language, format and conventions of their discipline. Therefore, all lecturers, irrespective of their discipline, need to take responsibility for helping students develop writing skills. For example, Holliday suggests that science lecturers should recognise that students need "to practice writing about science beyond filling in blanks and writing a paragraph or two on texts and in lab manuals using simple-minded knowledge telling strategies, typically unacceptable at good colleges" (Holliday, 1992, p. 59).

Ideally, if they are going to help students develop writing skills, lecturers need to adapt their curricular goals, teaching and learning methods and assessment practices in order to integrate writing support into their subjects. Directing students to the many books aimed at helping them to develop their writing is not sufficient since most of these offer only tips and suggestions, focus on grammar and syntax rather than on understanding and managing the process of writing, and rely on students to teach themselves how to write better. Nor is merely telling students what to do and what not to do enough because of the gap between 'knowing' and 'doing' and because developing effective writing skills and positive attitudes towards writing take time and effort, require support, instruction and opportunities for practice and feedback. Thus, writing support is most effective when it is provided by the lecturer as part of regular subject teaching.

Many lecturers, however, are often reluctant to integrate writing support into their subject because they believe that they do not have the knowledge and/or skills to do so. They may also not have the time to explore the literature on teaching writing and may be intimidated by the language used and concepts presented in such literature.

One way to encourage and support lecturers who are willing to enhance student writing but do not have experience in teaching writing, is to provide "user friendly" instructional activities and strategies which are easily adapted for use as part of regular subject teaching and are underpinned by, but do not assume or require in-depth knowledge of, writing theory.

## **Helping lecturers support writing**

We undertook a project funded by a Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development (CUTSD) National Teaching Development Grant (Individual) to develop a book describing activities and strategies to help lecturers across the disciplines to help students develop their writing skills. The project website <http://cea.curtin.edu.au/esaw/> provides further details of the project.

The book is in line with current thinking outlined above that suggests that writing is most effectively developed as an integral part of all disciplines. The strategies and activities included in the book are underpinned by a five-step problem-solving model of writing – the 5-by-3 Writing Model – that has been successfully used by students across a number of disciplines (Samson & Radloff, 1992; Radloff, 1994). The book is based on a social constructivist view of learning and recognises the complex nature of writing. It includes simple and practical activities and strategies that lecturers can use to help students manage any writing task. It does not assume or require that lecturers have formal qualifications or special skills in teaching English or literacy.

## About the book

Each step of the Model – Preplanning, Planning, Composing and Evaluating – is described together with teaching and learning activities which lecturers in a variety of disciplines can use. Each step is presented separately and the teaching and learning activities suggested are stand-alone, easily adapted to the needs of students and integrated into class sessions. Instructional activities and strategies are based on social constructivist theory (Needles and Knapp, 1994) and research on the self-regulation of student writing (Graham & Harris, 1997a, 1997b; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). Activities and strategies included those already developed, used and evaluated by de la Harpe and Radloff as well as those from across the disciplines obtained via web and library searches. In addition, valuable ideas and resources were also obtained from academics nationally and internationally in response to requests for input into the project.

Activities and strategies are presented using a simple and accessible format which allows them to be easily incorporated into subject content by lecturers in any discipline without the need for extensive rewriting of existing materials or major changes to assessment practices. In addition, the book includes characters (see Figure 1) who represent a variety of disciplines and perspectives on issues related to student writing and on managing the writing process.

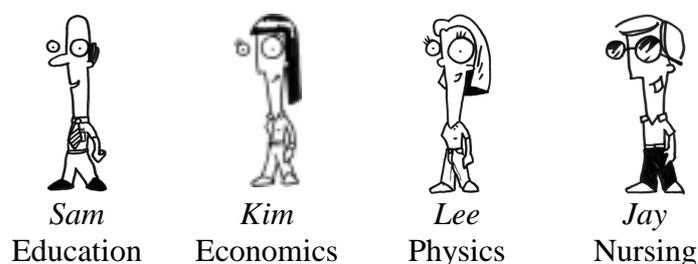


Figure 1: The four characters

Throughout the book, the characters model the use of problem-solving strategies, collaboration and reflective practice. It was hoped that presenting issues about helping students develop as writers through the eyes of the characters would encourage readers to identify with them and their students' struggles to be effective writers. Student quotes are also included in the book to highlight student perceptions and experiences of the support needed to help them develop writing skills.

Each chapter includes a session plan, overheads and examples of teaching and learning materials that can be adapted for different subjects and students, and a step-by-step guide for presenting the session. In addition, each chapter includes a reflection on the session highlighting the kinds of student reactions and learning outcomes that can be expected. Finally, it provides suggestions for alternative activities which lecturers can add to their repertoire of strategies to help students in their disciplines to develop writing skills.

## Trialling activities and strategies

Two experienced lecturers in quite different disciplines – Physics and Education – trialled the activities and strategies for each step of the Model in their respective classes. Each lecturer was given a draft copy of the chapters that described one way to teach each step and outlined additional activities and strategies that they could use. Their students were informed about the project and the purpose of the trials. After each trial, the lecturers completed a questionnaire about their experiences and reactions. In addition, at the end of the project, they provided a written reflection on their experiences.

Students also completed a feedback form after each trial providing their views about whether and how the activity had helped their writing and whether it had improved their confidence in writing assignments. They also listed three things they liked about the activity and three ways they felt the activity could be improved. Feedback from lecturers and students was used to identify which activities and strategies were the most valuable and how others could be adapted.

Feedback from the lecturers on trials of activities for each of the steps showed that both lecturers agreed or strongly agreed with the statements that “the activity will help my students to do their assignment” and “the activity was easy to integrate into my class”. The Education lecturer also agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that “the activity has improved my students’ confidence about doing their assignment”. The Physics lecturer did not comment on this statement because he found it difficult to respond to. Comments from both lecturers about implementing each strategy and activity were positive and typically included:

*“Generated a lot of discussion and excellent ideas from the groups.”*

*“Students came up with some extremely interesting ideas and issues that they would not have done if they were merely given the essay topic.”*

*“Made everyone feel that their ideas were valued.”*

*“Was informative for the students and me.”*

Suggestions for how each activity and strategy could be improved focused on implementation rather than about the activity or strategy itself, as illustrated below:

*“Allow more time.”*

*“I could fill a whole session because it is so important.”*

*“I spent longer on this than planned. Time constraints are a big problem.”*

Lecturers’ written reflections suggested that they found the Model and the activities and strategies helped them to integrate writing tasks into their teaching. They commented that, while they did not necessarily use the activities exactly as described, having activities that they could adapt, was helpful as illustrated by the following comments:

*“This project and the “In Writing” book have provided a valuable framework for teaching writing skills for the students and for myself. It also fits well within the constructivist paradigm of student-centred learning.” [Physics lecturer]*

*“The final comments from the students were positive. They all felt more confident about tackling writing tasks and were so encouraged by the Model, that they advocated its inclusion in all university courses, to strengthen the writing skills of students.” [Education lecturer]*

Feedback also suggested that the two lecturers used activities and strategies in different ways in response to the different needs of their students.

Both lecturers found that getting students to write drafts and review writing were particularly helpful and something which was a new activity for students, as illustrated by the following comments:

*“This process [reviewing] allowed students to reflect on their peers’ writing as well as their own. Student feedback indicated this was a particular valuable, difficult but rewarding process.” [Physics lecturer]*

*"The students brought in their essays and swapped them with other students, to complete the Review section. They had never been engaged in the task of reading and writing constructive comments on other people's essays. It was an eye-opener for them and it also gave them an insight on how others approached a task." [Education lecturer]*

Feedback from students showed that the aspects of each activity and strategy they most liked included:

*"The discussion part."*

*"I liked working in groups."*

*"Got to see what other people were thinking."*

*"It gave me a clear idea on the purpose of the project. What sort of things I need to do ie what it's aimed at."*

*"Clears up any misunderstood or unsure areas."*

*"I've never done a plan to write an essay, so I'm glad to have a model to use."*

Students also suggested that more time needed to be devoted to supporting their writing.

Overall, students generally valued having writing support as part of their regular learning, believed that their writing had improved and expressed increased confidence about themselves as writers, as illustrated by the following comments:

*"I think I feel a little more confident. I have a basic outline of how a paper should be written and the basic structure. I also know what other people expect in a paper." [Physics student]*

*"I feel I will be a lot more knowledgeable about how to tackle an essay from the onset. Following the format will be a lot easier and I will be a lot more comfortable." [Education student]*

*"I'm pretty confident that I can handle any writing assignment and sometimes I even enjoy writing!" [Physics student]*

*"I am beginning to feel more confident in myself as an essay writer. Before this essay, I had never used a plan. This essay writing has taught me ways to become an excellent writer for future tasks." [Education student]*

In addition to the feedback from the lecturers and students, the book was previewed by about 30 lecturers at the Teaching and Learning Forum 2000 in February 2000. Feedback from participants about format and layout, chapter structure, useability and relevance of activities was positive. Examples of typical comments included:

*"Very clear. Print is a good size, pictures are fun, story line is great and relevant."*

*"Friendly, clear layout encourages you to read on."*

*"Easy to follow, clear focus, addresses the major concerns of academics and offers good ideas...."*

*"Encourages reflection by teacher on activity which is relevant to current educational practice."*

*"Very relevant for the academic environment. Well done!"*

*"A useful tool for teachers in the sciences particularly."*

*"I feel really energized to give it a try with my students and I'm pleased I haven't printed off my unit guide yet!"*

*"This book should be issued to all staff so we're following the same guidelines."*

*"I love your book. Layout and structure is brilliant and really useful strategies."*

### Using the book

The book is aimed at lecturers who wish to help their students be effective writers in their discipline and who are willing to set time aside in their classes to do so. It is not intended to be read from cover to cover. Rather, once lecturers have decided which aspect of writing they would like to help their students to develop, they can either follow the step-by-step session plan including preparing overheads and teaching and learning materials using the examples provided. Alternatively, they can adapt the activities and strategies described or select from a number of other activities included at the end of each chapter.

The following are prerequisites for effective use of the book. First, lecturers must be genuinely committed to helping students be effective writers and convince students of the importance and value of putting time and effort into developing their writing. Second, they must be prepared to set challenging, meaningful and achievable writing tasks that require students to go beyond mere knowledge telling to knowledge transformation. Third, they need to create a supportive climate where feelings about writing are acknowledged and student anxieties about writing are addressed. Fourth, they must be prepared to use teaching and learning strategies that emphasise student-centred collaborative learning and reflection and provide discipline specific models of good and poor writing. Fifth, they need to harness the power of assessment by making expectations and assessment criteria explicit, allowing revision and resubmission and using peer and self-assessment.

### Reflecting on empowering lecturers

Our experience and the literature suggests that writing support provided by the discipline lecturer in the context of regular student learning can help students develop their writing skills and that lecturers need and appreciate help to do so. Such help is most useful when it is non-threatening, practical, easily adapted and appropriate to student needs. When provided with activities and suggestions on how to use them, lecturers are able to adapt them to suit their students' needs and their own teaching approach.

We believe that small changes in lecturers' beliefs about their role in supporting writing, in what writing tasks are set and how writing support is provided can lead to benefits for both them and their students. An increase in feelings of competence and confidence can empower lecturers to put time and effort into enhancing writing for learning, work and life since the "...answer to better writing across the curriculum has got to be in the hands of the teacher who sets the writing context" (Biggs & Moore, 1993, p. 371).

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### Keywords

Integrated writing support, writing model, teaching resource.

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Your writing skills can improve dramatically in just fifteen steps. And they're easier than you think! Learning a variety of tricks to improve writing skills isn't as difficult as you may think. We've put together a list of steps to help you make dramatic improvements to the quality of your writing in short order. Becoming a better writer takes practice, and you're already practicing. No, seriously—you write a lot. Even if you don't think of yourself as a writer, you put thoughts into text more often than you realize. At the very least, you write emails—a lot of emails—post on social media, make updates to your résumé and LinkedIn profile, and message your friends. If your job requires it, you

By Claudia Pesce 102,145 views. Anyone - whether they are an ESL teacher or student - will tell you the four main skills you need to develop when learning a second language are speaking, listening, reading and writing. Naturally, learning to speak the second language is often the priority. Listening is essential for speaking, and students easily practice listening skills through movies and songs. Reading is also a skill they may develop easily with the vast amount of material available on the Internet. But writing is usually the skill that is most poorly developed, nowadays only practiced in s

Arming your ESL students with writing skills can open up a whole new world for them. Here are 7 essential skills you should be including in your lesson plans! Your ESL students need to keep their English skills sharp at all times. Otherwise, writing English will be as frustrating as cutting veggies with a dull blade. It's time for your students to put pen to paper and explore their creative sides. Writing skills will be useful to them in a variety of situations and can help them develop a more well-rounded English skill set. Writing is even something they can fall back on in the event of a communication breakdown in an English-speaking country. It's important for you to encourage your students to think about writing through well-developed writing lesson plans. The developing of the language skills has always been a very hard and an interesting task. The process of writing suggests that we can actually teach students how to write with coherence, an appropriate grammar structure and an acceptable spelling. One of the effective ways to do this is to motivate the students and make them aware of the steps involved in effective writing. Four reasons why students dislike writing are

Developing Writing skills. When you prepare writing activities, consider how to make them as meaningful as possible. You can do this by thinking about audience, context and purpose. Generally to develop fluency in writing the writer has to concentrate and practice the various skills as follows; Planning ideas logically. Planning carefully helps learners arrange text in a logical sequence, that flows well and is easy to read. Some activities may focus on the accuracy of their language, and some on helping them to communicate the meaning. Others may focus on the writing process itself - learning how to start a writing task, how to draft, edit and review it. References