Writing Workshop

Writing for High-Quality Publications

Debra Myhill
University of Exeter
Research Quality

- A fundamental precondition for writing a high-quality publication is a high-quality research project;
- You can write a bad publication from good research but you can't write a good publication from weak research!
Research Quality

Think about:

- The focus of the research questions;
- The match of research design to research questions;
- The theoretical ideas which underpin your research question;
- The scale of your research;
- The robustness of the data analysis.
## Research Excellence Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REF Rating</th>
<th>Definition of rating from REF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 star</td>
<td>Quality that is nationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 star</td>
<td>Quality that is internationally recognised in terms of originality, significance and rigour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 star</td>
<td>Quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour but which falls short of the highest standards of excellence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 star</td>
<td>Quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only 3* and 4* research will be funded!
## Research Excellence Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>3 STAR</th>
<th>4 STAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SIGNIFICANCE</strong></td>
<td>An important point of reference in the field</td>
<td>A primary or essential point of reference in its field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contributing important knowledge, ideas and techniques which are likely to have a lasting influence</td>
<td>Major influence on the intellectual agenda of a research theme or field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ORIGINALITY</strong></td>
<td>Not just using existing paradigms or traditions of enquiry- going beyond this- novel in developing concepts, techniques or outcomes- e.g. a substantial, coherent and widely admired data set or research resources</td>
<td>Outstandingly novel in developing concepts, techniques or outcomes. e.g. instantiating an exceptionally significant multi-user data set or research resource</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RIGOUR</strong></td>
<td>Application of robust and appropriate research design and techniques of investigation and analysis with intellectual precision</td>
<td>Exceptionally rigorous research design and techniques of investigation and analysis Highest standards of intellectual precision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHOOSING YOUR JOURNAL
Journal Quality

- Impact factors are a proxy for research quality: they are not an objective measure of quality;
- They are often self-fulfilling: a high impact factor triggers more submissions which allows editors more choice which increases the quality of those chosen…
- A high-impact factor does tend to increase your own citation index, which may be a powerful (if flawed) metric in the future;
- You can find high-quality research in low impact journals and vice versa, but there is a ‘general’ relationship trend between publication quality and journal impact factor;
- Often, the quality of reviewing is higher and feedback more detailed in high-impact journals (though still subject to all the vagaries of bias and personal opinion)
Choosing a Journal

- Impact factors are nearly always higher in generalist journals, rather than specialist journals eg *AERJ; BERJ; Learning and Instruction*;

- Specialist journals can vary in quality, depending on how ‘niche’ they are: if a journal is very specialised and only relates to a small community, it can be inclined to accept lower quality articles because they are of interest to the field;

- Know your area: can you write a list of journals you can publish in from generalist, to specialist, to practitioner/professional and rank them according to impact factor?

- Publication strategy: there can be very good reasons for writing in a specialist journal, or in a practitioner journal. Think about your own publication strategy.
Language Education: a Spectrum

- Learning and Instruction (IF 3.72)
- Reading and Writing (IF: 1.444)
- British Educational Research Journal (IF 1.14)
- Written Communication (IF 1.062)
- Research Papers in Education (IF: 0.588)
- Language and Education (IF: 0.579)
- Literacy (IF: 0.4)
- English Teaching: Practice and Critique
- English in Education
- English 4-11
- English Drama Media
- Teach-it Online
Disciplinary Discourses

- Education is a field rather than a discipline, and inherently multi-disciplinary (but not always inter-disciplinary!)
- Be aware of disciplinary discourses: some journals in education draw heavily on the disciplinary discourse of the ‘home’ discipline: eg *British Journal of Sociology in Education; Learning and Instruction; Applied Linguistics*.
- It can be very hard (impossible?) to publish in these if your disciplinary discourse does not match: this includes disciplinary differences over research paradigms.
Journal Publication

- Choose your target journal **before** writing your article
- Research the journal carefully –
  - what is the style?
  - what kinds of articles do they publish?
  - what are their aims and scope?
  - who is on the editorial board?
- Read their guidance for authors – especially noting the word length required (nothing irritates editors more than a submission which has clearly ignored, or not read, the author guidance)
- Talk to your ‘mentor’ about the wisdom of your choice
KEY MESSAGE: YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE
Why is the message important?

- If you are publishing research, you have something to say: this is what you are publishing;
- This is true of empirical, theoretical and review articles;
- The message is your unique *theoretical* contribution to the field;
- Describing and explaining your research is not the same as making a point and developing an argument;
- It is critically important that your publication develops an argument.
Who is the message for?

- Other than writing which is totally for yourself as reader, writing is always about addressing your audience.
- Who is your audience?
- What are their assumptions and biases?
- How do they communicate their message?
- Are there discourse styles typical of this audience?
Words of Wisdom

You are standing on the balcony of a house in the Piazza Navone; the crowd are in the piazza, waiting –

what is your message?
Pinning down your message

Pre-writing strategies to ‘find’ your key message:

• Write the message of your article in less than 70 words;
• Write the message of your article in just one or two sentences;
• Write the message of your article in one sentence beginning with these ‘starters’:
  
  *In this article, I argue that*...
  
  *This article says*...
  
  *My claim is that*...
• Write your message as a newspaper headline
• NB Your message is a theoretical contribution to knowledge
1. This paper reveals that teenagers’ metalinguistic understanding is stronger at the lexico-semantic level than at the syntactic level, or textual level, but is strongly characterised by metapragmatic thinking.

2. This paper demonstrates how teachers’ personal epistemologies of the value of metalanguage in teaching writing are paradoxical: they subscribe to a literate epistemology which values literary metalanguage as part of the knowledge base of a creative, expressive subject, but linguistic metalanguage is not included within this literate epistemology.

3. This paper reviews research on the role of grammar in the curriculum and argues that the role of grammar has not been adequately theorised.
Your message: and so?

What are the key theoretical ideas or concepts in or behind your message?

How does this relate to theoretical thinking about this topic?

How does this relate to practice, pedagogy or policy?

Has anyone else, or have you, already communicated this message?

How does this relate to other empirical research in this area?

So why does it matter? What’s the ‘added value’? Why is it a contribution to knowledge?
THE VALUE OF ABSTRACTS
Abstracts: honing your message

- Writing an abstract can be fundamentally linked to the process of writing.
- It is a good discipline to write your abstract first, not last, as the abstract forces you in a limited number of words to synthesise your paper.
- It should make you state the problem or issue you are addressing, the methods you used to explore this, the findings that you have derived from this, and its significance.
- It is a summary of your argument (your thesis).
- Often this can highlight whether you are unclear of the argument you wish to make, or it can reveal that your article does not match the argument you claim in the abstract.
BJEP: Empirical Papers

Background State the background to the study.

Aims State the primary objectives of the paper and the major hypothesis tested (if appropriate).

Sample(s) State the selection process and numbers of participants.

Method State the design and procedures used, including the interventions or experimental manipulations and the primary outcome measures.

Results State the main results of the study. Numerical data may be included but should be kept to a minimum.

Conclusions State the conclusions that can be drawn from the data provided and their implications (if appropriate).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>State the background to the review.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims</td>
<td>State the primary objectives of the review.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>State the method used to select studies for the review, the criteria for inclusion, and the way in which the material was analysed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>State the main results of the review.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>State the conclusions that can be drawn from the review and their implications (if appropriate).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### BJEP: Theoretical Papers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>State the background to the paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims</td>
<td>State the primary objectives and scope of the paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arguments</td>
<td>Summarise the main arguments and supportive evidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>State the conclusions that can be drawn from the paper and their implications.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using Abstracts: my version

Background: A simple contextualising opening sentence or two which locates the issue or problem.

Aims: One or two sentences outlining the purpose of the work/the research question

Method(s): One or two sentences explaining the methods used

Results: One or two sentences indicating the main findings.

Conclusions: One sentence stating the implications and significance of the work.
The role of linguistic and literary metalanguage in the teaching of writing is contested, although there is some evidence that metalinguistic understanding supports writing development.

This paper investigates the personal epistemologies of teachers in relation to the place of linguistic and literary metalanguage in the teaching of poetry writing.

The data draws on 93 interviews with 31 secondary English teachers in the UK, following lesson observations, and the data is a subset of a larger study investigating the impact of contextualised grammar teaching on writing attainment. The interviews probed teachers’ pedagogical decision making in three writing lessons and elicited their beliefs about the value of metalanguage.

The analysis indicates that teachers’ personal epistemologies relating to metalanguage are ambivalent and, at times, contradictory. Teachers’ comments on the place of literary and linguistic metalanguage in poetry writing are paradoxical, but do appear to be strongly connected to their personal epistemologies. They subscribe to a literate epistemology which values literary metalanguage as part of the knowledge base of a creative, expressive subject, but linguistic metalanguage is not included within this literate epistemology.

Policy initiatives to re-assert the role of grammar and linguistic metalanguage within the curriculum needs to take account of these literate epistemologies.
PREPARING TO WRITE
What kind of writer are you?

Research in writing suggests there are two broad types of writers:

- **Planners:** these writers do a lot of work before starting the first draft; research; making notes; various kinds of diagramming/mapping; mulling; creating an outline of the text etc. Then they write the text reasonably quickly; and the text may not need huge revision;

- **Discovers:** these writers just start writing straight away; they write to find out what they want to say; they may have multiple drafts or unfinished pieces; and they need to do a lot of revision to shape the drafts into a coherent piece.

- Are you a planner or a discoverer?
Planners and Discoverers

- All writers think through writing, and the process of writing, even for a planner, may trigger changes to the argument, or even the key message;
- All texts need revision, and the amount of revision varies because some articles just are more problematic than others;
- Planners may need to stop planning and just get on with the writing and accept it may not come out perfectly;
- Discoverers may need to build in a stronger planning stage, though probably not at the beginning but after they have written a draft, or some ‘thinking it out writing’.
Outlining your Article

What is the purpose of an outline?

- A mapping task, outlining the journey your article will take
- A structuring task, shaping the macro-structure of the paper
- An ordering task, selecting the sequence of sections
- A coherence task, checking the line of argument
- A matching task, aligning the paper to audience expectations
- An evaluation task, refining the quality of the paper

It is an outline, or plan, of your writing intentions: not a rigid structure which must be obediently followed. It is the thinking it generates which is most important.
Creating an Outline

- Follow the standard structure for an article as a starting-point (introduction; theoretical framing; methodology; findings; discussion);
- Being aware of your message/argument is key;
- Your introduction should signal the ‘problem’ and the argument the paper will develop;
- Your theoretical review should show how research has already addressed the issue and the gaps (your work will fill);
- The methodology section should be clearly described;
- In the findings section, be sure that you develop an argument through the presentation of the findings – outline this;
- In the discussion section, you need to draw together the threads – the problem; the existing research and theory, your findings – to create a strong conclusion which states your original contribution.
THE METHODOLOGY SECTION
Methodology

- Although this is often called the Methodology, it is really a Methods section. Few journals require the philosophical outline of your methodology, but this may be necessary for some types of research;
- Methodology sections are frequently far too thin and vague;
- Make sure you state your research questions;
- Give precise detail about all aspects of your research design: sample size and type; how selected; data collection methods; data instruments; the analysis processes; ethics etc;
- Describe your research instruments carefully, including how they link to your research question and theoretical constructs they explore;
- Describe precisely your coding and analytical frameworks;
- Avoid throwaway/generalised comments eg *grounded theory; themes emerging from the data; ethnography; participant research*
- Address trustworthiness in qualitative research
PRESENTING YOUR FINDINGS
Data Presentation

- In both qualitative and quantitative studies, your findings section needs to be clearly presented to your reader;
- Check the clarity of tables and diagrams;
- Try to avoid being simply descriptive; there should be analytical comments which are flagging up the ‘big ideas’ you pick up in the discussion;
- With qualitative data especially:
  - Develop a line of argument through your data presentation, perhaps through sub-headings;
  - Show your data so the claims you make can be visibly justified by your data;
  - Beware of cherry-picking to suit your argument;
- Consider the ‘warrant’ of your argument: what is the weight of evidence you can claim; is the link between claim and evidence clear; how generalisable is your data
Writing is a process ‘in which every line, every phrase, may pass the ordeal of deliberation and deliberate choice’.

Coleridge