At the Time of Writing: The Three Tenets of a Good Theory of Writing

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The problem of a general lack of motivation, of productivity, and of quality - what Wendy Belcher (2009) calls ‘writing dysfunction’ – is all-pervasive across academia. If you are similarly afflicted then this article offers a solution to your problem. Among the primary causes of writing dysfunction according to Eric Hayot (2014) is the way that academic writers think about writing, their ‘theory of writing’ (1). Based on research conducted in the classroom and drawing on the ideas of Belcher (2009) and Hayot (2014) this article attempts to release academic writers from their misery by outlining a good theory of writing. Composed of three tenets, the theory asserts that writers pursue a passion, follow an academic writing process, and use writing as a tool to develop their thinking. In the course of this, the article also suggests ways in which academic writers, especially those using English as a foreign language, can learn to write with more originality. After discussing the tenets, the article provides an example of a highly motivated, prolific, and original writer who embodied all three tenets of the good theory of writing. The article concludes by drawing attention to a set of printable resources available on the journal’s website.

Key words: academic writing, theory of writing, writing process
Introduction

The way that academic writers approach writing – what Eric Hayot (2014) calls their ‘theory of writing’ (1) – is a powerful determinant of motivation, productivity, and quality of output. Put another way, how a writer thinks about writing strongly influences their desire to write, how much they write, and how well they write. Weighed down by a bad theory of writing, they are more likely to be unmotivated, unproductive and to write poorly. Equipped with a good theory of writing, on the other hand, academic writers are more inclined to be motivated, productive and to write well. This article seeks to help undergraduates and postgraduates understand what a good theory of writing is, speaking directly to those who struggle to write, often for reasons that are not readily apparent. However, it goes beyond simply helping student-writers write more freely; it offers a number of ways in which they can develop the capacity for original thought. Composed of three tenets, the theory asserts that writers, firstly, choose topics that are of genuine interest to them, secondly, that they follow an academic writing process, and, thirdly, that they use writing as a tool to develop their ideas. The centrepiece of the article is the academic writing process, representing the culmination of three years of research completed in the classroom at a public university in West Japan. The process outlined here is the result of weekly learning reflections conducted with student-writers between 2014 and 2017, their feedback recorded in notebooks organised by academic year, semester and week number\(^1\). Divided into four sections, the first three discuss each of the tenets in turn, with the fourth offering a case study of a writer whose approach to writing was underpinned by a good writing theory. The article concludes with a practical way forward for student-writers wishing to follow the three tenets.

**Tenet 1: Pursue a Passion**

This first tenet is arguably the most important of the three. It determines the amount of time, effort, and energy the writer is prepared to expend on a piece of writing. However, genuine interest in a topic does not, in and of
itself, guarantee high quality or original academic output. The second and third tenets are responsible for channelling the writer’s interest through a process and enabling the writer to develop his or her thinking in novel ways. To be clear, then, all three tenets are important, but the level of commitment is defined to a large extent by writers’ adherence to the first.

That ‘successful academic writers pursue their passions’ (Belcher 2009, 10) is an obvious point to those who do have a personal investment in their chosen topics. The point will be less obvious to those who have not been afforded the opportunity to try. In compulsory educational settings, for instance, students are generally given topics to write about. How a student feels about the topic will depend on their degree of interest in it. If it is one that they are interested in, they are likely to have what Belcher (2009) calls a ‘positive writing experience’ that creates positive feelings about writing (5). However, if the topic does not interest them, then they are likely to have a negative writing experience that leads to negative feelings about writing. For example, in one academic writing class, I set my student-writers a short writing exercise on the same topic – the city in which their university was located - in the belief that they would be familiar with it and would find it sufficiently interesting to write about. In feedback after the exercise, some groups relayed to me that they enjoyed writing about it – some had even gone to the extent of physically choosing to attend the university precisely because of their fascination with its location. Others however expressed less enthusiasm. In fact, two groups reported that the exercise proved my contention that to write properly about a topic one required knowledge and interest.

If knowledge and interest in a topic make for a positive writing experience, then allowing student-writers to choose a topic for themselves can only enhance the experience further. As I have discovered in my own context, students who are trusted to choose a
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topic for themselves have the capacity to produce first-rate work. Consider the two articles published in the first issue of this journal. Both students chose their topics and were clearly fascinated by them. Ogino (2018) in her piece mounts a robust defence of the idea of a Universal Basic Income (UBI). Underpinned by a detailed and extensive knowledge of the relevant literature, she declares a UBI to be the best solution to the problem of poverty in richer countries. Reading her piece, it is clear how much she revelled in the opportunity not merely to put her opinion into words but to assert it in the public domain. Saito’s (2018) piece brings up to date Mori’s (2001) definitive work on the electability of the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDJ) during the second half of the twentieth century. The evidence of his fascination in his chosen subject lies in the breadth and depth of his knowledge of the intricacies of the protracted struggle between continually shifting rival factions within the party in their attempts to define its political stance. As these examples demonstrate, for writers to excel, they need to write about topics of their choosing and ones by which they are genuinely fascinated. This is especially true for student-writers in their formative years, precisely when they should be afforded positive writing experiences.

Tenet 2: Follow an Academic Writing Process

That writing is a process is such a well-known axiom that it has almost become a cliche. However, the processes described in textbooks designed to teach EFL (English as a Foreign Language) student-writers academic writing (e.g. Folse and Pugh 2015; Zemach, Broudy, and Valvona 2011) fall a long way short of enabling writers to produce academic papers of the kind published in this journal or any other. The second tenet of a good writing theory assumes that writers wanting to write an academic paper will follow an academic writing process. The one outlined here was developed by myself and represents the culmination to date of my academic training, experience of teaching academic writing and knowledge gleaned from textbooks on
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writing by Folse and Pugh (2015), Zemach et al (2011), and most important of all, Belcher’s (1990) workbook (the latter referred to in Mitcham 2018). Comprised of 12 steps (see Figure 1), the process facilitates the production of any type of academic paper, be it theoretical, literature survey, or empirical, presenting qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods research.

The first step conforms with the first tenet and has student-writers choose a topic that they are passionate about. The following step sees the student-writer brainstorm their existing knowledge of the topic, including any references they may recall. Step 3 ‘Reading’ has student-writers compile a reading list of secondary sources - work, that is, published on their topic - in their first language and then read those sources. In my academic writing classes, students are advised to search their library catalogue, seeking the assistance of a librarian if necessary, find relevant material using Google Scholar, and consult an expert on the topic for a list of key readings. The advantages of completing the reading stage in the student-writer’s first language are fourfold: expediency, thoroughness, authority, and originality.

Expediency: Reading in their first language means that student-writers can identify and digest the literature far more quickly than would be possible reading in a second language.

Thoroughness: Related to expediency, student-writers can gain a more complete knowledge and understanding of the literature around their topic than they could in a second language.

Authority: Student-writers, when reading in their first language, are much more likely to read authoritative sources such as books and journal articles. This is particularly so in the case of student-writers writing in locations where sources in their first language are accessible and readily available.

Originality: If student-writers are reading the literature in their first
language, the chances of their work being original are significantly increased, especially if the topic has not been written about in English before.

In the Analysis phase, student-writers critically reflect on the literature around their topic in order to identify a potential contribution they might be able to make. In their critical reading they search for gaps in the research, existing questions that remain unanswered, questions that have yet to be asked, arguments that lack nuance, and alternative ways of examining the topic. In the Research phase, student-writers identify their primary sources and employ methods to extract and record relevant data from those sources. In my classes, student-writers are acquainted with primary sources and methods employed by the authors of papers published in Volume 47 Issue 2 of the geography journal *Area*. One is a qualitative paper by Raska and Brazdil (2015) on past responses to flash flooding. The other is a quantitative paper on the human impact on the global environment by Phillips (2015). In the Interpretative phase, student-writers interpret their data employing a mode or modes of analysis. For qualitative research, this might be a theory such as phenomenology (e.g. Heidegger 1927), psychoanalysis (e.g. Freud 1904), existentialism (e.g. Sartre 1943) or actor-network theory (Latour 1987). For quantitative research, this might be Forest Transition theory (Mather 1992), Lipfert dose-response function model (Lipfert 1989) or Spearman’s Rank Correlation Co-efficient.

With all the information and analysis student-writers have accumulated following the process thus far – the topic, literature summary, literature analysis, primary data sources, methods, record of data, the mode or modes of interpretation and the resulting interpretation – they organise it into a coherent structure, achieved ‘when each part of the paper leads logically to the next (Belcher 2009, 172). They may decide to use a version of IMRD (Introduction-Method-Results-Discussion) or other sequence if this is not appropriate. They may also select a structure from
a suite of other organising principles. The following are taken from Belcher (2009):

- Go from what their readers know to what they don’t know
- Go from the simple to the complex
- Go from the uncontested to the more contested
- Go from the general to the particular
- Go chronologically from the past to the present
- Go spatially through a succession of linked objects, as if on a guided tour (173)

Other ways of structuring and organising information the student-writer may wish to use at the micro level of the paragraph, intermediate level of the section, or macro-level of the whole paper include description, sequence, cause-effect, problem-solution and comparison (for more on the basic types of structure see Belcher 2009, 172). In my classes, students are familiarised with the structures of three papers: the qualitative and quantitative papers referred to above along with a third paper published in the same issue of Area by Rapoport (2015) about the production and dissemination of environmentally-sustainable cities and urban areas. The first two follow IMRD, the third, based on qualitative research, follows a cause-effect pattern.

With the structure chosen, student-writers make a detailed plan of their paper and begin work on a first draft, being sure to follow Tenet 3 (discussed below). Once completed, they put the draft down for a few days. Returning to it with fresh eyes, they then revise the draft thoroughly. This produces a second draft. In the Sharing phase of the process, student-writers invite a trusted person to read their paper and give them constructive feedback. The feedback the trusted person gives is used as the springboard for a second full revision. This produces a third draft. In the final phase, ‘Review’, student-writers go through their paper checking for and fixing errors, confirming also that their in-text and full references are correct. When this is done, the paper
The process outlined above sounds linear and fixed, but it is not. In fact, the idea that the writing process is non-linear is not new. Folse and Pugh (2015) make the same point in their textbook Great Writing 5. Writing about the process that they describe, Folse and Pugh (2015) state that it ‘is not a linear one’ and that rather than progressing from one step to the next student-writers ‘will likely go back and forth between steps’ (34). Folse and Pugh (2015), on this most critical of points, say nothing further. That the process is non-linear in nature requires further emphasis and elaboration. One possible solution to the problem I think is to rebrand the process. The word ‘process’ is useful to hold on to because, like a piece of academic writing, it consists of a beginning, a middle and an end, and/or a series of steps to reach an end. But the word by itself implies linearity. To disturb this, I suggest appending the word with a label that connotes the opposite meaning. The label that I believe the best achieves this is the term ‘agile’.

‘Agile’ is derived from a project management (PM) approach that originated in software development (Highsmith 2013). It emerged in response to traditional styles of PM which came to be seen as prescriptive and overly rigid (Fernandez and Fernandez 2010). By contrast, ‘agile’ forms of PM are flexible, adaptable, and iterative through the entire process from inception to completion. In a fully operationalised ‘agile’ writing process, none of the products of academic process phases 1 through 6 - the topic, the brainstorm, the literature summary, the literature analysis, list of primary data sources, list of methods, the record of data, the mode or modes of interpretation and, interpretation/analysis and the plan - are all subject to revision at any point. The topic, for instance, may be subject to revision multiple times. The remembrance of a piece of knowledge in brainstorming might be the trigger, or the discovery of new knowledge in reading, or the literature analysis. Or, it could well happen in later stages of the process as well. As will become clear, one of the key drivers resulting in one or more of the aforementioned
products being revised or rewritten is step 7, Writing.

**Tenet 3: Use Writing as a Tool to Think Through and Develop Ideas**

Using writing as a tool to develop one’s thinking is inspired by Eric Hayot (2014). What writing should not be, he argues, is ‘a memorialisation of ideas’, ‘a necessary but tedious step in the distribution and fixation of ideas’ or ‘a process whereby you put down thoughts you already have’. This approach to writing, he argues, ‘makes for mediocre writers and mediocre prose’. What writing should do, he insists, is ‘distil, craft and pressure-test ideas - it [should] create ideas’. Writing, he points out, ‘is a kind of learning’, a ‘medium for research and discovery’. ‘[Y]ou do not know what your ideas are, mean or do’, he asserts, ‘until you set them down on paper or on screen’ (1). This approach to writing, it may be inferred, makes for original writers and original prose.

Reading Hayot’s (2014) perspective on writing was, for me, utterly transformative. Until then, the mental construct I had of the practice mirrored precisely how writers, in Hayot’s (2014) view, should not think about it. As a result, all my academic writing through my years as an undergraduate and postgraduate was under-developed and ill-thought through, my PhD thesis included. In the latter may be found some good ideas, to be sure, but they are ideas which, looking back at it now, 16 years after completion, I could have made so much more of. I went into my PhD excited about my chosen topic – the activities and interests of two UK metropolitan-based philanthropic organisations between the mid-1880s and early 1930s (Mitcham 2002) – and the prospect, in the course of reading and research, of finding new things to say about it. The prospect that I least relished was writing. Through a succession of negative writing experiences during university, underpinned, I now realise, by a fundamentally flawed way of thinking about the practice, I had learned to dislike it and, moreover, avoid it at all costs. This sounds odd for someone about to begin a PhD, but since PhD theses take up to four years to
complete, I took comfort in the knowledge that I could delay formal writing for several years. Were it possible to travel back in time and advise my younger self about writing I would tell him not, as I had been prone to do, to consider the acts of thinking and writing as being antithetical: the former associated with pleasure, challenge and creativity, the latter with monotony, inertia, and disinterest; but to employ the latter in the service of the former. I would tell my younger self that writing is to ideas what sunshine, soil, and water are to seeds. With writing, ideas will develop and flourish, but without writing the end result will be weak and sickly. I would also say that committing an idea to the page for the first time does not mark the end point in one’s thinking, but just the beginning. Had I approached writing in this way, my thesis would almost certainly have been a much longer, higher quality, and more original piece of work.

Sadly, the way I thought about academic writing is all too common across academia. This, Hayot (2014) contends, is either because academic writing in English-majority speaking countries such as the United States is not taught at all, or, where it is taught, with some notable exceptions, such as UC Berkeley in California, it is taught poorly (8). The same is true of textbooks on academic writing for EFL student-writers. Of the ones I have encountered, none state how writing does any more than simply fix ideas to a page. As a consequence, they risk producing a generation of EFL student-writers whose writing in English will fall a long way short of its potential. Teaching how writing can not only develop and nurture ideas but also create them is a certain way of helping student-writers to improve the quality and originality of their work. Teaching all three tenets of a good writing theory will enable student-writers to see their work published in respectable academic journals (for advice on publishing, see Chong 2019).

The Three Tenets in One Writer
Wendy Belcher (2009) points out that academic writers, unlike the writers of fiction discussed in Tanner (2018), are...
reluctant to talk about how they write, let alone write about how they write. It is not surprising, then, that my search either for a first-hand account by an academic writer about how he or she writes or commentary about how an academic writes was unsuccessful. This led me to look beyond academia. That search proved to be much more profitable. Reading Alain de Botton’s (1997) *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, I discovered the famous French essayist, critic, and novelist, Marcel Proust (1871-1922). In his book, De Botton describes in detail how Proust conceived of and set about writing his epic seven-volume novel *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*), published between 1913 and 1927. He embodied as a writer all three tenets of the good theory of writing outlined above.

His passion for the topic of *In Search of Lost Time* – bourgeois life in Paris, France in the early twentieth century – and writing was incontrovertible. His passion translated into careful reporting of the minutiae of this world elaborated by means of long sentences for which he is well-known – the longest, in the fifth volume that ‘would, if arranged along a single line in standard-sized text, run on for a little short of four metres and stretch around the base of a bottle of wine seventeen times’ (De Botton 1997, 32).

Coupled with his enthusiasm, Proust was the epitome of an agile writer ‘not realiz[ing] the nature of what he was trying to write until he had begun to write it’. De Botton (1997) explains:

When the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time* was published in 1913, there was no thought of the work assuming the gargantuan proportions it eventually did; Proust projected that it would be a trilogy [*Swann’s Way, The Guermantes Way, Time Regained*], and even hoped that the last two parts would fit into a single volume […]. However, the First World War radically altered the plan by delaying the publication of the succeeding volume by four years, during which time Proust discovered a host of new things he wanted to say, and realized
that he would require a further four volumes to say it. The original five hundred thousand words expanded to more than a million and a quarter. (124)

Finally, Proust used writing as a tool to develop his ideas and hone his writing:

Each page, and a great many sentences, grew, or were altered in the passage from initial expression to printed form. Half of the first volume was rewritten four times. As Proust went back over what he had written he repeatedly recognized the imperfections of his initial attempt, words or parts of sentences were eliminated, points that he had judged complete seemed to be crying out for recomposition, or elaboration and development with a new image or metaphor. Hence the mess of the manuscript pages, the result of a mind perpetually improving on its original utterances. (124-126)

Even after submitting his manuscript to the publisher, the resulting neatly-typed proofs ‘only served to reveal yet more errors and omissions, which Proust would correct in illegible bubbles, expanding into every stretch of white space available until, at times, they overflowed into narrow paper flaps glued onto the edge of the sheet’. As De Botton (1997) notes, this ‘might have enraged the publisher, but it served to make a better book. It meant that the novel could be the product of the efforts of more than a single Proust [which any interlocutor would have had to be satisfied with], it was the product of a succession of ever more critical and accomplished authors’ (126).

Marcel Proust is an excellent example of a writer whose approach to writing followed the three tenets of a good theory of writing. He was passionate about his topic, an agile writer par excellence, and he used writing as a tool to develop his ideas. While he was not an academic writer, Proust was nevertheless motivated, productive, and highly original. As such, student-writers would do well to follow his example.

Conclusion
It is a sad fact that the reason many
student-writers find it difficult to write is because of the way that they think about writing (Hayot 2014, 8). They are not writing about topics that interest them; they may be following a writing process, but not an academic one; and writing is menial rather than creative. The advice in this article is designed to help student-writers become more motivated, more productive, and raise the quality of their output. It has also suggested three ways in which they might be more original writers. By completing the reading and research phases of the process in their first language, identifying gaps in the literature and, following the third tenet, using writing as a tool to develop their writing, originality is more readily achievable. Practical support for student-writers is available on the journal website should they wish to follow the advice outlined in this article. On the page marked ‘Resources’ there are three items. The first is an Academic Writing Assignment (AWA) containing detailed instructions to be read in conjunction with the advice set out in this article. While it is designed around a 15-week course of study, student-writers who are completing it independently can work at their own pace. The task takes them through the academic writing process from initial topic selection to the final review stage. Upon completion, student-writers can reflect on their performance at each stage of the process and award themselves a grade for the process as well as the final paper. The process is worth 80% of the final grade, the final paper 20%. The rationale for this weighting is that if the process is followed correctly, the end result will be a high quality and original piece of writing. The second is an AWA task quiz. Composed of 18 questions, the quiz ensures that student-writers fully comprehend what the AWA requires of them. The third item is an Academic Writing Journal. To be completed alongside the AWA, it offers student-writers a space to reflect on and develop their ideas. Needless to say, since the materials have been designed around a 15-week course of study - the length of a university semester in my teaching context - teachers are also welcome to
use the materials in their classes. Student-writers should be aware that the ideas in this article are not to be taken as a definitive statement on the subject. As the main title of this article indicates, ‘At the time of writing’, the ideas expressed reflect my views in the here and now. Even so, as ideas they will, through further reading, continued research, and interactions with colleagues across academia, continue to evolve.

Notes
1. The weekly learning reflections - where students reflected on the material covered in the previous class - were based on a sentence completion exercise taken from Harmer (2007, 397). The sentences students completed were as follows: The thing(s) that I enjoyed most in last week’s class was/were….; The thing(s) I learnt last class that I did not know before was/were…; The thing(s) I am going to do to help me remember what I learnt last class was/were…; The thing(s) I found most difficult in the last class was/were…; The question(s) I would like to ask about what we have done is/are… (397). Note that students’ responses to the above were not collected. They were written for the students’ own reference - serving, not least, as a reminder of what they had learnt - and as the basis for discussion in small groups after which general opinions were agreed, written up on the board and fed back to the whole class.
2. The feedback was noted in Week 11, in Spring Semester of academic year 2016/2017.

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### Appendix

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<td>Step 9:</td>
<td>Revise first draft and produce a second draft</td>
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<td>Step 10:</td>
<td>Share second draft with a trusted person</td>
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<td>Step 11:</td>
<td>Revise second draft and produce a third draft</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 12:</td>
<td>Review third draft</td>
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**Figure 1: The academic writing process**