

A reading list for academic writers

Five books to have on
the shelf



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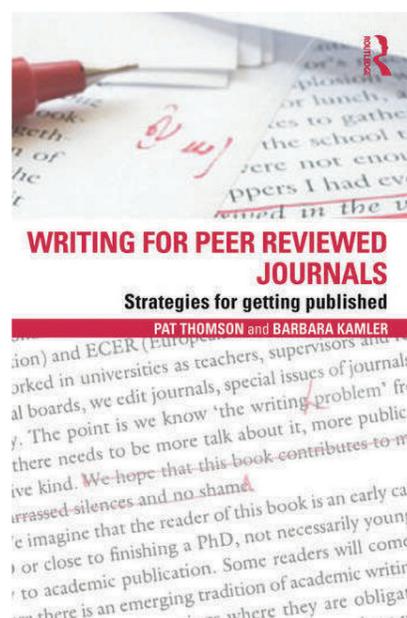
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Where to turn?

Finding good advice on academic writing can be challenging because the choices are overwhelming. A recent search for "academic writing" on Amazon yielded over 10,000 hits. If you're serious about improving your academic writing, this selective list includes five books that I think are worth having on your shelf. I return to them again and again, and in the notes below I explain why I think they're so useful to have close by when you're working on your next journal article or proposal.



Writing for peer reviewed journals: Strategies for getting published

Pat Thomson and Barbara Kamler

ISBN: 978-0415809313

This book is one of the few I've come across that addresses an existential challenge of academic writing that few people talk about: the identity work required to become a confident academic writer. As Thomson and Kamler write, "the vast majority of researchers are very good at reporting and describing a set of findings. They can tell you what they did, what they found, and what the research site looked like... But they lack the confidence to argue and package what they have to say in the kind of format and language that a journal will find acceptable." To be authoritative is a stance that many early-stage researchers are not comfortable with, and Thomson and Kamler provide advice on what it takes to make that transition.

They go on to list questions that researchers have to answer before they can get published, offer strategies for *doing* the writing, provide excellent advice and questions about how to choose the right journal, explain the realities and layers of academic publishing, and provide valuable before-and-after examples. They also focus on developing and refining an argument, explain why writing an abstract first is an efficient way to start writing a paper, tell readers how to identify and explicitly state the contribution, and explain why you should have a publication plan and how to create one. The most valuable part of this book for me is their focus on the writer and the difficult and sometimes painful work of developing an academic identity. As someone who edits journal articles almost daily, I can confirm that identity work (or lack of it) is an intrinsic and palpable element of writing that comes across clearly in a text. Half the work of writing is being confident that you have something worth saying.

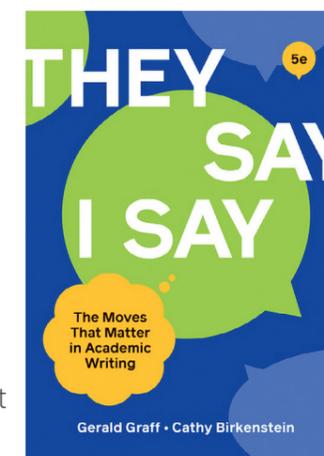
They say, I say: The moves that matter in academic writing

Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein

ISBN: 978-0393538700

While the focus of *Writing for peer reviewed journals* (p. 2) is on the important work of developing the academic identity needed to engage with peers in academic journals, Graff and Birkenstein focus on positioning one's research in the context of academic discussions and debates within a field. The incredibly easy-to-use, thought-provoking templates in this book are designed to help researchers position their work by having them consider how it relates to the work of other researchers. These authors make it easy for researchers to think about how other readers will (or might) respond to their work.

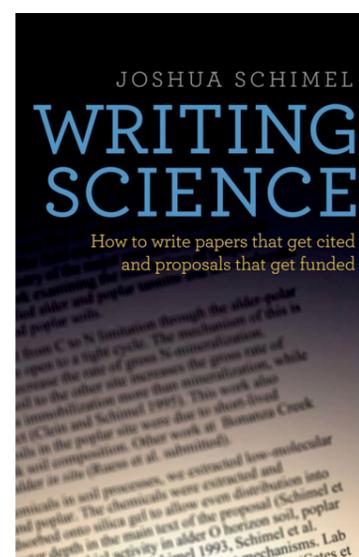
This book provides one of the most-accessible and relevant entry points on academic writing that I've found. I've used it with a number of clients who have fallen in love with the "Readings" section, which shows how the template formats they provide appear over and over in published articles in the natural and social sciences. In addition, this book helps researchers identify the significance of their research and – even more important – discover what it is they want to say in the first place. If you've ever heard advice that you should answer the "So what?" question in your academic writing and that you should anticipate reader responses, but haven't been able to figure out how to apply this advice to your own writing, this book will help you do both.



Writing science: How to write papers that get cited and proposals that get funded

Joshua Schimel

ISBN: 978-0199760244



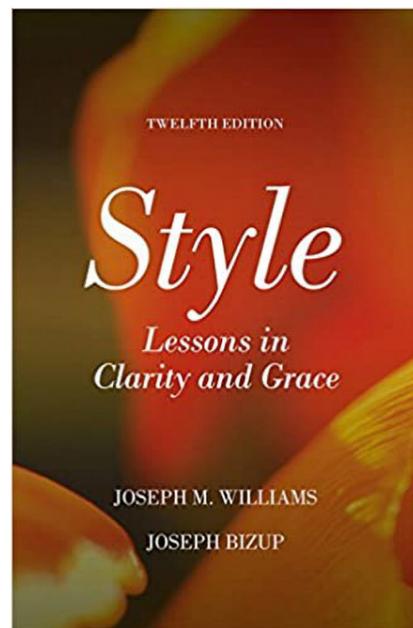
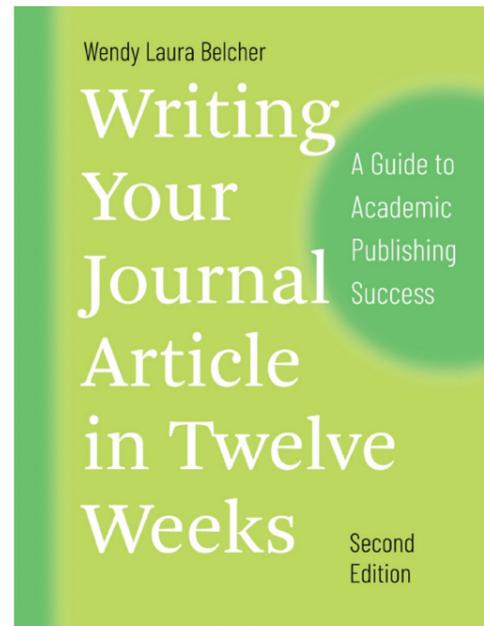
While this book has excellent advice for researchers in all fields, its target audience is researchers in the natural sciences, which fills a much-needed gap. Throughout the book, Schimel works in excellent advice for academic writers – for example, that the writer's job is to make the reader's job easy – and he provides a lot of concrete advice on how to do exactly that. I also appreciate how he addresses misguided researcher assumptions head-on: for example, most researchers believe that simply presenting their findings in a journal article is enough. Not so. Schimel advises researchers to find a story in the data, for which he provides key questions that will help them get to an answer. I like this approach – and use it myself in my work – because it's writing without feeling like writing. I also appreciate that he reveals the model structures of journal articles and proposals and recommends when to use them (i.e., in which specific types of journals); that he focuses on specific sections, such

as openings and resolutions; that he provides many examples – of poor writing and how to improve it; and that he offers advice on how to stress and emphasize. I find Schimel's directness refreshing. He exhorts researchers to take an assertive stance: In an example in which authors were being too tepid, he writes, "...by trying too hard and doing it badly, they ended up being confusing." But my favorite part of this book is his advice to researchers that it's okay to be wrong: "[Y]ou are a scientist—your job is not to be right. It is your job to be thoughtful, careful, and analytical; it is your job to challenge your ideas and to try to falsify your hypotheses; it is your job to be open and honest about the uncertainties in your data and conclusions. But if you are doing cutting-edge work, you are not always going to be right."

Writing your journal article in twelve weeks (second edition)

Wendy Laura Belcher
ISBN: 978-0226499918

This is the most-comprehensive book on writing journal articles that I've found, and it's an invaluable reference to have on your shelf. From what an argument is to how to test whether what you have is really an argument and how to turn it into one if it isn't, to the essential advice on how and why to write an argument-driven article (rather than an evidence-driven one), this book covers all the bases. Belcher has scoured the research on academic writing and bases her practical advice on it, confronting researchers' fears of writing and identifying why you don't write as much as you should, helping you create a realistic writing schedule with daily and weekly tasks. She also drills down to specifics about managing your works cited and the process of submitting and revising-and-resubmitting. I use this book in all aspects of my work, from developmental editing projects to workshop modules and individual writing-coaching sessions, especially the sections on crafting the all-important claims for significance. My paperback copy is dog-eared and marked throughout, and my e-book version has yellow highlighting from top to bottom. I especially like Belcher's comprehensive list of references, which I've used to track down excellent sources. Even if you don't manage to stick to the twelve-week schedule, you can easily jump around in this book to focus in on the aspect of your writing you most need help with now.

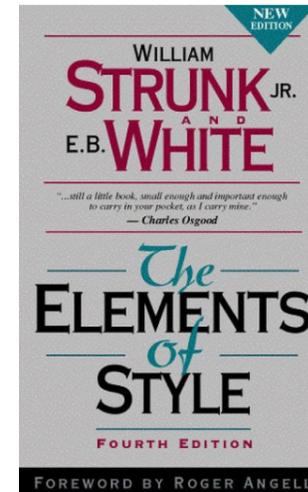


Style: Lessons in clarity and grace (twelfth edition)

Joseph M. Williams and Joseph Bizup
ISBN: 978-0134080413

When I first started doing developmental editing – the kind of intense text work that goes beyond mere proofreading to restructure sentences and paragraphs so they communicate ideas more clearly – this book opened my eyes to an entirely new way of thinking about writing. Before reading it, I could easily tell when something about a text was not working, but I didn't know why it wasn't working or how to fix it. After reading it (and re-reading it!), I became enamored by Williams and Bizup's diagnoses of writing problems and their solutions for fixing them. I continue to use their principles when working on developmental editing projects, in workshops, and in writing-coaching sessions. Specifically, their concepts of actions, characters, cohesion and coherence, emphasis, and concision have been the foundation of the developmental text work I do every day. The concepts they outline are based on research about writing and how readers process information.

It's one of those books that will change the way you approach writing and help you enormously as you edit your own work.



I've got a little extra space, and I want to use it to recommend a book that I wouldn't dream of dishonoring with the designation of honorable mention. It's much more than that. Not only is it the first book I read about writing (that actually got me excited about writing), it's one that's a pleasure to read – and re-read. Although not a book specifically about academic writing, every academic writing book and resource cites it – for a reason. At under 100 pages, it's a compact resource to turn to with questions about grammar and style that – while at times showing its age – is still a guide that reads with a freshness and vitality, with dos and don'ts about writing and style that is good enough to always have close by. You can easily slip back into it for the comforting, prescriptive voice of William Strunk Jr., which comes through on every page, or turn to it for answers to specific questions about, for example, what a relative pronoun is or when to use – and when to not use – a comma in English.

ABOUT ME

About Marc Abernathy

For over 12 years, I've been helping PhD students, postdocs, and junior professors get their articles published in their target journals and their research proposals funded. I love working with motivated researchers, learning about their work, and helping them achieve their career goals. I've worked with clients at the University of Göttingen, the University of Mannheim, the University of Antwerp, and the University of Vaasa, among many others, to help them publish their papers in journals such as *Organization Studies*, the *Academy of Management*, and *Nature Communications*. I've taught workshops for the Ludwig Boltzmann Gesellschaft in Vienna, the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich, and TH Köln. And I've coached researchers from such universities as the Free University in Berlin, the University of Jyväskylä, and the University of Innsbruck. I'd love to get to know more about you and find out whether I'm the right person to help you with your next academic writing project – be it a journal article, funding proposal, or an abstract. I offer 45-minute get-to-know-each-other sessions for first-time clients, and you can book one easily by scanning the QR code to the right or going to <https://www.marcabernathy.com/service-page/get-to-know-each-other-session>. I look forward to getting to know more about you and your research.



BONUS BOOK

How could I not mention...