

10 tools for improving your academic writing. Hope they are of some use to you. By Rasmus Grønfeldt Winther (www.rgwinther.com), following critique from other academics on www.academia.com

1. *Commit it to paper.* When a thought or emotion or experience occurs to you, write it down. Whether you are in the shower, mountain biking or kissing someone, if a noteworthy thought emerges, capture it. You'll lose it if you don't grab it, pet it, and transform it into written text. Also: write often; write a lot. Many writers set aside between 1-2 hours of sacrosanct time every day, often in the morning, dedicated only to intense writing, to committing thoughts to paper.
2. *Write with empathy.* Put yourself in the place of the reader. Imagine concrete readers sitting in a chair or on an airplane reading you. Would s/he care about what you are saying? Would s/he understand it? Could you say something more simply, more directly, more clearly, more empathetically? Don't try to say everything you know. Avoid too many abstractions or lists. Tell (small) stories. Don't be boring!
3. *When criticized, don't blame the reader.* Whenever you get feedback on your product and you want to scream "but I said that clearly!," "how could my claim possibly be misunderstood?," take a step back. Yes, you may perceive the critic as a dummy, an ignoramus, an uncharitable dumb-ass, etc. Not every reader is your ideal reader. All you can do is change yourself, not the world. Breathe. Sleep on it. Detach yourself from the criticism – don't take it personally. Calm down and return to the critique and ask "What can I DO to make this piece of writing more effective, more understandable, more fun?" See a challenge as an opportunity. Return to the writing process.
4. *Follow a detailed and organized structure.* You need a map and compass in writing a long (or even a short!) text. Make a clear outline. As part of the writing process, concretize your outline, sometimes with entire paragraphs under each point. Depending on the conventions of your field, you could be guided by a structural ideal, say, "3+3" (3 paper sections, each of which has 3 sub-sections, all of which cohere logically). When you are lost in your writing, return to your outline.
5. *Distinguish process from product.* Process is messy and diachronic. Product should be as neat and complete as possible. Remember: title, abstract, thesis, sections, bibliography, page numbers (!), name, date, good structure, grammar & style. Above all, have a clear and compelling argument.
6. *Rewrite.* Always rewrite. One more time. Again. Again. Yes, Again. Your product will improve.
7. *Writing and reading intertwine – do both.* When you write, read. When you read, write. Engage in both processes simultaneously. Perhaps read good novels when you are writing philosophy or sociology. Or read good science writing when you are writing history. Why? Every time you read or write something, you adopt multiple perspectives. Reading while writing (and vice-versa) encourages you to become fluent in many perspectives. "The danger of a single story" indeed (Adichie). Ultimately, you are the reader and the writer of every text with which you engage. Be responsible to that.
8. *Be orthodox.* Learn the ropes. Do due diligence. Read what other very smart intellectuals, artists, and scientists have produced about your topic and research program. Be humble. Please don't be a know-it-all. There are many dizzyingly wonderful ideas and methods out there. Learn them – all of them. Cite and use them in your work.
9. *Be creative.* Find your voice. Find your contribution. What can you add to the cacophony (or is it symphony?) of voices? This will take time but never give up on trying to locate and develop your uniqueness, in context. Do something new. Do something good.
10. *Accept that writing is a life-time commitment – never ever ever, ever give up.* You will get better at writing. Even then, there is always so much further to walk. Accept that there is no conclusion per se (save for your/my final breath). You will never be the "perfect writer" or "the Olympian writer." No one is! And you can take breaks: set aside your writing for a few days or weeks if you must. Return to it. Your process and your product will smile back at you when you face it again. Above all, have faith that you will continue improving, sometimes by leaps and bounds, and other times much more gradually.