Developing Researchers' Writing Skills: A critical reflection of developing a series of academic writing workshops for postgraduates

Anna Fancett

Researcher Development Online, University of Warwick, UK
Correspondence: Anna.Fancett@warwick.ac.uk
Twitter/X: @AnnaFancett
ORCID: 0000-0001-8075-431X

Abstract

Although belief in the 'sage on the stage' (the teacher as an expert standing at the front, delivering information) and tabula rasa (the student as a blank slate, ready to be written on) belongs to the distant past of outdated pedagogical theory, writing skills, especially grammar, are often treated as exceptions. This is especially the case when learners are also researchers; with pressure to produce high-quality work within tight deadlines, researchers are often expected to receive grammatical knowledge passively and replicate it promptly. This is what we sought to change. At the end of 2021, I created a series of academic writing workshops, which I have subsequently delivered to postgraduate students at Warwick University. This article provides a critical reflection of what I did, what challenges I faced, and what lessons I learned. It is hoped that this reflection will empower other academics and instructors to approach academic writing for postgraduates with confidence and integrity.

Keywords: writing; grammar; postgraduate researchers; online learning

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Introduction

Teaching models that view the instructor as the 'sage on the stage' (the teacher as an expert standing at the front, delivering information) and the student as a passive receptacle of knowledge[i] have been outdated for decades, and excellent work has been done on promoting active learning online (**see, for example, Darby & Lang, 2019**). However, postgraduate researchers often do not benefit from these pedagogical developments when it comes to academic writing. Either there is the assumption that they require no additional writing training, or they are expected to learn through passive methods, such as through webinars and static resources (including books and websites). Although many of these resources are excellent, they do not enable postgraduates to engage intellectually with the improvement of their communication skills, leading to a lack of acumen and confidence. This problem is poised to worsen with the introduction of AI-assisted technology. In 2021, Warwick University's Researcher Development Online department already offered a vast range of workshops, covering key skills and wellbeing activities. Postgraduate researchers requested that academic writing be added to the timetable. This created an opportunity and a challenge – an opportunity to provide practical support in an area in which many postgraduate researchers struggle, and the challenge of creating a series of workshops that meet non-uniform needs for postgraduate researchers across departments and levels.

The Workshops

I developed the initial series of workshops in the winter break between 2021 and 2022, employing the Coaching Development Model used by the department, and I first delivered the workshops that spring. The initial offering included ten key workshops and five auxiliary ones (**Table 1**). Despite the overall success of the workshops, some changes were made in the subsequent semesters; we split some of the workshops, creating short 'top tips' sessions that focused on a particular grammar point or a writing skill, such as adding detail or using the passive voice. We also added workshops based on feedback from participants, including ones on writing academic articles, reviewing articles, and responding to feedback from journals. At the time of writing, in February 2024, over 20 workshops are available with different ones offered in each trimester (spring, summer and autumn). The workshops range from 60 minutes (top tips sessions) to 120 minutes (the introduction to academic writing workshop) with the majority landing in the middle at the 90-minute mark.

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Table 1: Workshops that ran in the Springs of 2022 and 2024.

Spring 2022 Main Workshops	Spring 2024 Main Workshops
Academic Writing 101: Getting the basics correct	Academic Writing: What is it and how to prepare for it
Starting to Write: Making sure you're fully prepared	Writing Sentences: Starting strong
From Sentence to Thesis: Making every sentence work for you	Paragraphs: The building blocks of your thesis
Paragraphs: The building blocks of your thesis	Finding, Reading, and Quoting Research
Engaging with Scholarship 1: Putting your thesis into context	Representing Other Research Fairly, Organising Your Reading, Filling the Gap
Engaging with Scholarship 2: Becoming part of the research community	Long Documents: Practical tips for working with long documents, structuring your work, signposting
Bringing It All Together: Structure, signposting and working with long documents	Writing Introductions and Conclusions
Introductions and Conclusions: Beginning and ending well	How to Respond to Feedback
Hypothetically Speaking: Writing hypotheses and making projections	Writing Proposals and Abstracts
How to Respond to Feedback	Writing and Giving Conference Papers
	Advanced Writing: How to edit effectively
	Advanced Writing: Writing an article for publication
Spring 2022 Auxiliary Workshops	**Spring 2024 Top Tips Sessions**
Writing for the Public and Writing for Academics	Writing Hypotheses: The conditional, the future perfect, the subjunctive
Proposals and Abstracts	The Passive Voice: What is it and when should I use it?
Writing and Giving Conference Papers	Punctuation: An overview
Different Types of Academic Writing: Literature reviews	Academic Hedging: Advantages and pitfalls
Different Types of Academic Writing: Reports and surveys	Focus on Style: How to be more concise
	Focus on Style: How to be more detailed
	Focus on Style: How to sound more sophisticated
	Focus on Style: Differences between British & American writing

Participation is capped at 15 with the majority of workshops running with between 10 and 15 participants. All workshops run online through Microsoft Teams, and the most popular ones are offered twice per trimester. This reflection will explain the approach taken to the workshops, the feedback received, the challenges faced, and the lessons learned. It is hoped that this will enable further discussion of the provision of academic writing support for high-level postgraduate researchers, a demographic that is often overlooked.

It is an important facet of Researcher Development Online that every workshop or activity uses a facilitation-style approach. For the academic writing workshops, this meant that I combined active learning and participant-led strategies. Whereas undergraduate academic writing workshops tend to focus on either imparting knowledge to the students or correcting errors, it is important to recognise that postgraduate researchers have different needs. Every participant is not only an expert in their field but also an experienced academic. I start my introduction to academic writing workshop by asking everyone how much experience they have in academic writing; some respond by saying they have already had numerous books and articles published. Even the ones who say that they have no experience of academic writing have written dissertations and proposals. Additionally, many of the participants use tools with which I have no experience, including, for example, Zotero (for managing sources), and AI programs. Experience of writing in languages other than English is also a benefit that participants can bring to the workshops: being able to explain how essay structure is different, for example, can help illuminate what is expected in the UK academic system. Whereas in an undergraduate class I might take a more instructor-led approach, explaining a grammar point, giving the students some exercises to practice it, and then setting a more open task in which they can practice the point in context, I draw more from the participants in the postgraduate workshops. The result of this approach is that every workshop is different and fluid, building on the knowledge of the participants, and responding to the specific queries raised.

How does this work in practice? It starts with the introductions, with which I begin every workshop. As well as asking the participants to introduce themselves, I explain my own background, including my research history in literature, my academic publishing record, and my experience of teaching grammar and academic writing to undergraduates. I foreground that I do not have experience of everything and that although I supplement my knowledge with recommendations from peers in other disciplines; information taken from academic writing books, workshops and communities; and examples found in articles from across disciplines, I do not and cannot know everything that is relevant to writing in each participant's subject area. I also recognise that my own practice is not ideal in every circumstance and that what works for me does not work for everybody. By being open about my own limitations, I empower the participants to share their knowledge regardless of how experienced they are.

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By allowing time for introductions, I establish that the workshops are learning environments in which everyone can and should participate, which then feeds into the activities within the workshops. For example, after the introductions, I start my Introduction to Academic Writing workshop with a short activity in which participants guess the type, purpose and expected audience of six writing samples ranging from a text message to an extract from a white paper. This leads us to general questions about academic writing: what is it, what is its purpose, and who reads it? These simple questions can lead to a wide-ranging and elucidating discussion that branches off into the expectations of different types of readers, how to adapt work for different journals, the expectations of examiners, and how to write in a cross-disciplinary setting. Every discussion is different, and every discussion builds from the knowledge and questions of the people in the room; usually, this works well, so my role is to be a facilitator, ensuring that each question is answered and every point is fully explained.

At other times, I set tasks. For example, when discussing how to summarise, I give the researchers a sample paragraph with three possible summaries and ask the participants to choose the most appropriate summary and justify their choice. From this, we discuss what makes a good summary and establish what we think good practice is. In this way, we reverse engineer the rules for summary-writing. Although there are some elements I want to 'teach' the participants, in five-minute blocks of instruction, the focus is on their contributions rather than my pre-prepared 'lessons'.

Feedback is elicited in different ways. After each workshop, a feedback form is sent electronically to each participant. Every couple of weeks, the anonymised feedback is collated and sent to me. This enables me to track what has worked and what has not worked in each of my sessions. Informal feedback is also elicited through comments made directly from participants. These can be spoken or written in the chat on Teams. Between June and October 2022, informal written feedback was collated by the department and provided to the individuals. From this feedback, I selected all the descriptive words to form a word cloud (**Figure 1**). Finally, I use my own responses to the sessions as feedback. When workshops descend into silence, when participants seem frustrated, or when there are questions I have not anticipated, I make appropriate changes.

The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive from the start, as the word cloud in **Figure 1** illustrates. However, there have been four key challenges. These challenges and my responses to them will form the next part of this reflection.

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Figure 1: A word cloud based on feedback from participants in which the words
'interaction', 'perfect', 'helpful', and 'useful' are prominent.

Challenges

The first significant challenge is one that I anticipated from the beginning, but which could not be solved until I had worked with the postgraduate researchers. This is the challenge of attempting to teach grammar though an active learning, facilitation approach. Although the majority of my workshops work well through eliciting information and experience from the participants, there are some grammar points which, if not known, cannot easily be worked out. If someone wants to know, for example, how to form the passive voice, it is possible to help them work it out through active learning methods, such as analysing a piece of writing in the passive voice, establishing how it is different from a 'regular' piece of writing, and then reverse engineering the rules. This, however, is a long process; what would take five minutes for an instructor to explain, turns into an hour-long activity. As postgraduate researchers have demands on their time, using the active approach is not ideal. Therefore, I initially decided to include these grammar points in longer workshops; the passive voice, for example, was included in the introductory workshop as it is one of the features of academic writing that may be unfamiliar to people experienced with other types of writing. This, however, did not work. The participants who wanted to learn about the grammar point found that there was not enough time dedicated to it. On the other hand, those who were already experienced in it found it odd and frustrating that they had to spend ten minutes on it during their workshop. As a result, I decided to split the

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workshops, separating the more esoteric sides of writing from the grammar, forming one-hour top tips sessions for the latter. Each top tips workshop consists of introductions and getting-to-know-each-other activities, a short introduction to the language point, questions for the participants to work on, and time to put these points into practice. The top tips sessions, therefore, conform more to the expectations of a traditional grammar lesson than to the facilitation approach used in the other workshops. 8 topics are covered in these top tips sessions: talking about the future, which covers using the conditional and writing projections and hypotheses; using the passive; hedging; being more precise; being more detailed; punctuation; navigating British and American language; and writing in a more sophisticated way. By separating these language points from the main workshops, it is possible to keep the main workshops active and empowering to the participants while still allowing people to come and learn specific language points as required.

The second challenge was the varied needs of the different attendees. In an undergraduate academic writing classroom, most students are at similar levels. There is a curriculum stating what the students should already know and what they need to know by the end of the course. The instructor also has the same students every week, meaning that they can assess the levels of those students and create resources and activities accordingly. This is not the case in our workshops. The postgraduate researchers can come at any level of their studies. This can include people who are new to postgraduate studies as well as people who are finishing their final PhD thesis. It can include people who have already written books and articles or are accomplished writers outside of academia, as well as people who rarely write in English. Additionally, the postgraduate researchers come to the workshops with different needs, which include improving the mechanics of their writing, building confidence, finding motivation, managing the workload, improving in a specific area, or uplevelling their writing in general. Furthermore, postgraduate researchers attend these workshops from all disciplines meaning that it is difficult to find examples that are understandable for everyone. Compounding the difficulties caused by the participants' varying needs is the fact that the postgraduate researchers do not have to attend a whole series of workshops. I may only meet a postgraduate researcher once if they choose to only attend one workshop. As a result, I cannot plan with specific participants in mind as I would if I were running an undergraduate academic writing class. This means that there is a risk that what I have prepared is not suitable for the participants who are in the online room with me. This also means that I may have a group with very different needs and expectations.

This is a challenge that will never fully be resolved. As long as workshops are open to all postgraduate researchers, there will be participants who have different needs and expectations. However, there are some practices that help mitigate this challenge. The first is that I try to be as specific as possible in my descriptions of the workshops so that people come knowing what to expect. Splitting the workshops so that the more technical language elements are covered in separate shorter workshops, as previously mentioned, has also proved extremely useful. Those who need grammatical intercession can receive it in these sessions, allowing the main workshops to be more flexible. The top tips sessions also tend to be smaller, which encourages people to use the target language because they know that the other participants struggle with exactly the same issue, thus making it a safe and inclusive place for them to practise. Another important response to this challenge is getting to know the participants and their expectations as much as possible. This is achieved through the opening introductions. I can therefore respond to the participants' needs during the workshops, perhaps changing particular activities or signposting them to where they can get specific further information and support.

The third challenge was unexpected. Knowing that I would be working with some of the most talented postgraduate researchers in the UK, and wanting to employ an active learning approach, my original plans included the participants writing paragraphs and sharing them with each other for feedback. There was a lot of resistance to this, and at times participants would leave the workshop when I set a task. From this, I learned that the approach that I would have taken in in-person workshops (getting people to write) does not work in the online setting.

The first solution to this challenge was using short example paragraphs for the participants to discuss and analyse in breakout rooms. This involves less stress than writing because the participant is not being asked to produce their own work. Working in a group also means that there is less pressure on them to make an insightful comment. I use paragraphs from different sources: some are taken from books on academic writing; these are particularly useful when I want to use examples of bad writing without criticising a real person. I also use examples from academic articles, especially ones that focus on pedagogy in Higher Education as these have been written with academics from different disciplines in mind. To add some variety, and to ensure that all subjects are covered, I have asked my peers in different disciplines and workshop participants to share examples of well-written articles with me. I use extracts from these articles as examples. This has proved very effective as my workshops have remained varied and have given participants the opportunity to share their knowledge from their own disciplines. Separating the workshops into the

main workshops and the top tips sessions was another way to respond to this challenge. The top tips sessions attract a smaller number of postgraduate researchers, all of whom are struggling with the same specific issue. Because they know this, they are more comfortable practicing their writing and sharing their work with each other.

The fourth challenge was also unexpected. When I used examples of good and bad academic writing and asked the postgraduate researchers to analyse them, I was surprised by their responses. Often, the examples of bad academic writing were praised, and the examples of good academic writing were criticised. This challenge, although surprising at the time, has not caused a problem. Instead, I use the postgraduate researchers' responses as a springboard for further discussion: what is it that you found good or bad about this particular piece of writing? At times, we have discovered that the difference of opinion is due to the expectations of different disciplines. What is considered good writing in one discipline is not always good writing in another. This would not have been discovered if a facilitation approach had not been used in these workshops. At other times, when the postgraduate researchers liked a piece of writing that had been chosen for being bad, and they were asked to explain what was good about it, they found faults on closer inspection, thus creating the opportunity for analysis. On the other hand, when they disliked good writing, it was often part of the recognition that there is no such thing as perfection. This similarly has led to useful discussions about editing and about the minutiae of language.

Lessons Learned

Participants have reported finding the courses useful. Nevertheless, as the challenges above have hopefully made clear, there have been some things that have not worked, and I have learned several lessons from creating and delivering these workshops. The first one is to not try to be too original or special. When I first created the workshops, I wanted to combine grammar with commentary on thesis writing. Every workshop that I offered combined a little bit of the grammar with a little bit of thesis writing. For example, my third workshop, which was on sentence structure, tried to use different sentence constructions as metaphors for different ways of constructing theses. This however did not work because the postgraduate researchers that wanted to focus on learning how to construct different types of sentences were less interested in metaphorical understandings of their thesis. On the other hand, people who were coming to the end of their PHDs and wanted to work on getting an overall picture of their thesis did not need to do the work on sentence construction. Splitting the workshops into general and mechanical areas was more conventional than I originally had in mind, yet it has proved to

be effective. Another lesson I learned is that it is essential to be flexible; some changes happen from trimester to trimester, and others happen in a workshop as it is happening – both are equally valid. At the beginning of this project, I would panic when the postgraduate researchers said in the introductions that they had very different expectations than I had for the session. However, I have learned to adjust my workshops accordingly, when necessary, or when one or two participants want to cover something different, to state that we are adhering to the workshop as described. Going forward, I intend to continue working with the postgraduate researchers at the University of Warwick, adapting my workshops to respond to their ever-changing needs.

Dr Anna Fancett has taught English literature, language and academic skills in the UK, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Japan, and China since graduating from her PhD in 2015. Alongside her teaching practice, she has published articles and chapters on novels of the Romantic period and contemporary storytelling practice. Her 2020 article on Chinese translations of Walter Scott's novels, published in *The Wenshan Review*, won the Jack Prize for that year. She enjoys working with students at all levels and is currently working on a companion to Walter Scott for undergraduate students.

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To cite this article:

Fancett, A. 2024. Developing Researchers' Writing Skills: A Critical reflection of developing a series of academic writing workshops for postgraduates. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 11(3), 304-314. Available at: https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v11i3.1567.

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Endnotes

[i] Dennis Fox studied how educators visualise the role of teachers and learners, concluding that effective teachers view learners as active, and ineffective educators view them as passive (**Fox, 1983**).