

Academic Writing: A Self-Assessment Strategy for Cadence, Fluency, and Vocabulary Choice

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Abstract

Entering graduate students typically demonstrate a wide range of academic writing competencies. The purpose of the instructional practice described in this chapter is to close the writing literacy gaps and raise the standard of graduate writing overall. The practice is designed to specifically address three significant traits of writing—cadence, sentence fluency, and vocabulary choice—by introducing several activities that will generate self-assessment

and self-improvement of student writing. Students perform these exercises on samples of their own writing. As a result of the critiquing and revising inherent in the process, student writing dramatically improves. Ideally instructors would introduce the strategy early in the program or course of study to establish high writing expectations and a shared language and process for writing improvement.

Introduction

Adult students exhibit a wide range of formal writing abilities as a direct result of earlier writing instruction, availability of writing opportunities, and personal levels of competence. Often evidence of their writing strengths and weaknesses becomes apparent during the writing samples they are required to produce as part of a university's application process. Although composed under pressure at the time, the writing samples are clear windows through which faculty can ascertain what is lacking in terms of formal academic style and engaging content. In almost all cases, further attention and action are necessary to elevate candidates' writing to recognized scholarly standards.

Review of Literature

The literature on adult academic writing is mostly confined to the ends of the higher education spectrum. At one end are the research studies of undergraduate and community college writing improvement strategies while at the other end is a narrow band of writing advice and experiential strategies for doctoral candidates preparing their dissertations. What is well-recognized is that adult writing is a skill, a habit, and a process as well as a product. In colleges and universities, strong writing skills are expected and more frequently demanded of students by instructors who are frequently published writers themselves. Aitchison (2009) recognizes that nowadays, academic writing is moving from an emphasis on writing as a "discrete skill" to the idea that writing does not happen in a vacuum. The act

of writing, Aitchison claims, is a "complex, context-specific social and cultural practice" (p. 906). As such she approaches writing from an "academic literacies" perspective, cogently arguing that writing is not an isolated competency but occurs in the broader context of the academic environment including "speaking, reading, critiquing and writing" (p. 906). Furthermore, Aitchison maintains that academic writing is best learned and taught side by side with the subject content and knowledge, rather than "bolted on as a separate activity" (p. 906). This notion that writing skills should not be considered in isolation from one another nor from the subject matter is also supported by British researchers Elander, Harrington, Norton, Robinson, and Reddy (2006), who claim that core writing criteria, such as use of language and sentence structure, are abilities that are not only "intertwined with subject knowledge" but "are needed *in order* to understand and produce knowledge" (p. 84).

Self-assessment approaches to writing improvement have been endorsed by teachers and scholars for some time. Peden and Carroll, researchers from the University of Wisconsin, endorse the American Psychological Association guidelines for psychology majors, which suggest that self-assessment assignments meet important personal, academic, and institutional goals by encouraging students to "assume responsibility for their education, become reflective learners, and also help instructors, departments, and institutions achieve their assessment goals" (American Psychological Association, 2007; Peden & Carroll, 2008, p. 313). Peden and Carroll conducted a quantitative text analysis of student's language in self-assessment and concluded that self-assessment assignments elicit different ways of writing. In particular they found that self-assessments "activate cognitive processes" and also produce more reflective thinking (p. 316). Self-assessment plays a complementary role in developing academic literacies with a particular emphasis on academic writing.

Practice

An instructional practice that has been employed and that has proven particularly effective in raising adult writing self-awareness

and self-improvement is the coordinated deconstruction of three significant aspects of all writing criteria: cadence, sentence fluency, and vocabulary choice. These aspects are integrated to comprise the driving mechanism of the instructional strategy. Cadence is defined as the rhythmic arrangement and flow of sentences, including length and variety. Fluency is defined as the seamless internal structure of sentences, and vocabulary choices are just that—the selection of appropriate and precise language. This deconstruction process is described in the following sequence:

1. Cadence: Sentence structure quantification
2. Fluency: Conjunction identification
3. Vocabulary: Word choice analysis

This instructional practice was used in a Master of Education class as an example of its application. Prior to the implementation of the instructional practice, these graduate students retrieved copies of their individual initial interview essays. These essays were created at the time of the admission interview process. Following the standard formal interview, applicants spent an hour or longer writing a summary of the article “Parent Involvement” (Comer, 2007). The precise instructions to applicants were, “Please read this article and summarize the content in 2–3 pages. There is no time limit.”

During the first quarter of their master’s program, the participants enrolled in the course Fundamentals of Teacher Research and were introduced to scholarly writing, American Psychological Association (APA) style and formatting, and the avenues of graduate research open to them. Part of the first class meeting was devoted to the Six-Traits Writing Rubric (Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, 2000) and in particular the traits of sentence fluency and word choice. Although initially inspired by the Six-Traits Writing Rubric developed by North West Regional Education Lab (NWREL) in Oregon, the practice of scrutinizing adult writing to enhance its effectiveness in the areas of cadence, fluency, and vocabulary was tested at Antioch University by the author in 2008 and implemented at City University of Seattle in 2009 in both the Assessment and

Teacher Research courses. A description of the writing self-assessment activities and exercises which make up the instructional practice follows:

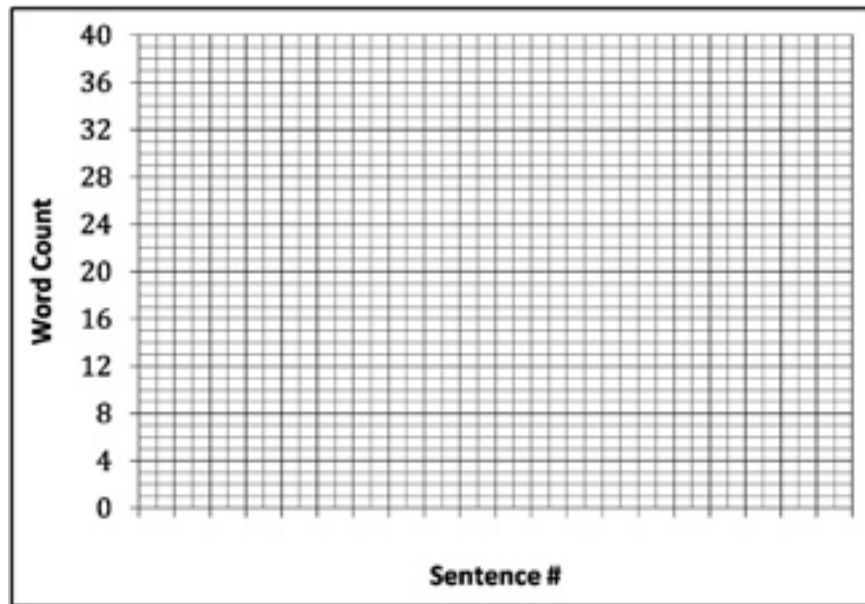
Cadence: Sentence Structure Quantification

Students were first instructed to read their application interview essays, number each sentence in order, count the words in each sentence, and record the numbers on a T-chart. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Sentence Word Count T-Chart*

	Sentence #	Word Count
Sample	1	12
	Sentence #	Word Count
	1	
	2	
	3	
	↓	
	n	

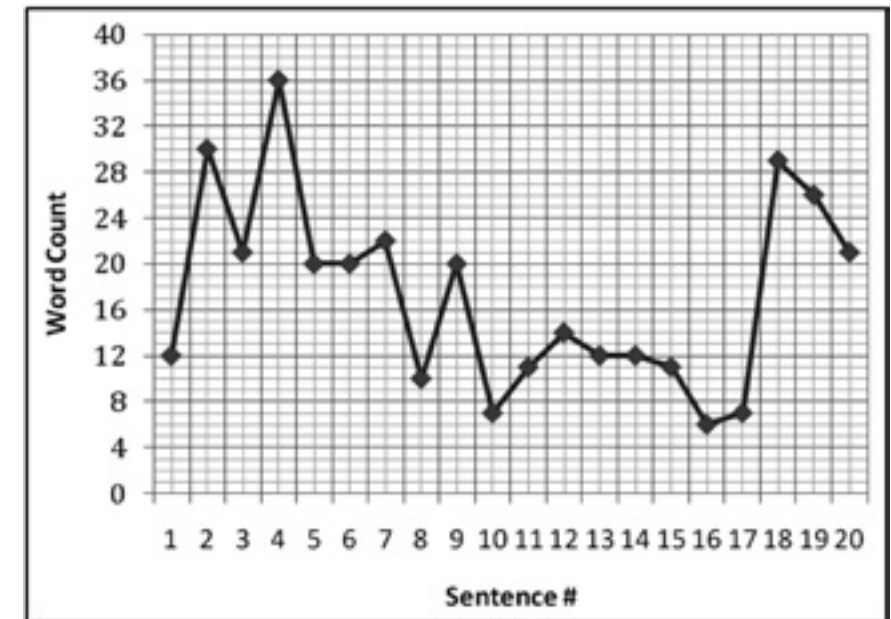
Next, each student prepared a sheet of graph paper with the sentence numbers on the horizontal axis, the word counts on the vertical axis, his or her last name, and graph labels. See Figure 2.

Figure 2. *Blank Cadence Graph*

Students then proceeded to plot the coordinates (x,y) from the T-chart correctly and link points to form a line graph. The subsequent graph was a visual representation of the cadence of their writing rhythms. The next steps were to self-analyze the graph by asking themselves the following questions:

1. What do I notice?
2. What is the value of this exercise?
3. What are my next steps?

Further critiquing and analysis were achieved by posting all student graphs on the wall followed by a group discussion focused on comparison, contrast and commendations feedback. This discussion was facilitated by the instructor. See Figure 3.

Figure 3. *Sample Cadence Graph*

Sentence Fluency: Identifying First Words and Conjunctions

This instructional exercise required students to return to their essays and identify the first words of each sentence, the first three words and any conjunctions (connecting words e.g., because, although, and, if then). This data was entered on a Sentence Fluency Chart. See Figure 4.

Figure 4. Sentence Fluency Chart

#	First Word	First 3 words	Conjunction
Sample	The	The day was	although
#	First Word	First 3 words	Conjunction
1			
2			
3			
4			
↓			
n			

When the chart was fully completed, students carefully scanned their charts for interest, variety, and flow, thereby self-assessing their strengths and also those areas that needed attention and greater scholarliness. When this screening and critiquing had been accomplished, students turned to a partner to share findings and to reflect. See Figure 5.

Figure 5. Sample Word Choice And Sentence Fluency Chart

#	First 3 Words	Word Count	Bright Word(s)	Repeated Word(s)	Conjunction
1	The article "Educational	14	leadership	the	or, for
2	It talks about	19	benefits community involved	the	as, and
3	Parent involvement is	17	involve- ment par- ticipating present limited		but

4	This includes parent	20	includes social	the, parent	and
↓					
n					

Vocabulary: Word Choice Coding and Analysis

The students selected one page of their essays and assembled the following supplies: highlighter, red pen, and black pen or pencil. The purpose of this coding activity was to clearly and visually distinguish between *new* words, *dead* words, *bright* words, and words that were *repetitive*. New words are the ones that the writer has never or rarely used in prior writing; dead words are words that are dull, imprecise, or clichés, e.g., get, stuff, thing, and nice, plus phrases such as “you know;” bright words are dynamic, high impact, or especially scholarly; and repeated words are those used more than once on the page. After choosing the page they wished to code, students conducted four vocabulary parses employing the following coding system:

- new* words Circle in red
- dead* words X out in black or draw line through
- bright* words Highlight
- repeated* words Underline in black

See Figure 6.

Figure 6. Sample “Word Choice” Coded Page

The article, “Educational Leadership,” is about the SDP or School Development Program for change. It talks about the benefits of the students, as well as staff and community when the parents are involved. Parent involvement is not limited to just a parent being present in their students’ life, but participating. This includes parent teacher conferences, the parent helping the student learn, getting involved in social events, performances and much more. Parents and teachers working together is beneficial to not only the school, but the student by providing a school climate that involves “developmental pathways-physical, social-interactive, psycho-emotional, ethical, linguistic, and cognitive.” (pg 2)

Having parents, teachers, students and staff working together is beneficial to the students, school, teachers, and in turn the community, under the SDP theory.

Key

blue = new words

red = dead words

words = bright words

_ = repeated words

Once this activity was completed, students recorded their own responses to the following prompts:

1. What do I notice?
2. What is the value of this activity?
3. What are my next steps?

Students then revised and re-submitted a second draft for consideration. See figure 7.

Figure 7. Sample Second draft

The article, “The Rewards of Parent Participation” (Comer, 2007) describes a School Development Program (SDP) that was implemented in the Oakland School district in 2005 to increase parent involvement. The author enumerates several benefits enjoyed by students, as well as staff and the community due to increased parent participation.

Parent involvement is not solely limited to parents being present in their student’s home life, but also includes being engaged in the academics and activities of the school. For example, parent teacher conferences, tutoring, social events, and much more.

When parents and teachers work together everyone advances- students, teachers, and parents - because a school climate has been created that understands and respects the core connection to families. Parental involvement in Comer’s School Development Program “not only improves teaching and learning; it can also transform families’ lives (p. 40). By far the greatest benefit of the SDP is the greater awareness and support of the larger school community.

Comer, J. (2005). The rewards of parent participation. *Educational Leadership*, 62(6), 38-42.

The entire instructional practice concluded with an opportunity to debrief the process using such questions as “What was effective?” “What was lacking?” “What needs to be adjusted?” “What do you now aspire to?”

Impact and Application

The positive impact of this strategy has been most apparent in the students’ Teacher Research products. Students perceived remarkable improvements in their own writing and have been anxious to try the strategy in their future classrooms with beginning writers. These adult students also have acquired a common language with which to constructively critique their own writing and the writing of others.

This writing self-assessment strategy can be readily used by college and university instructors and also by classroom teachers and writer groups. The exercises and steps are user-friendly and lend themselves to tangible results, constructive analysis, and valuable

feedback. Ideally the self-assessment process will enable adult learners to proceed productively and independently at their own pace, thus freeing up writing and research instructors to nimbly and more effectively address individual writing needs. In practical terms instructors would introduce the strategy early in the program or course to establish high writing expectations. Faculty interested in applying this strategy would need to collect original samples of student writing and make copies for the in-class exercises. It is further recommended that teaching faculty either observe a writing class where the strategy is being employed or attend a workshop to learn the effective use of the strategy and the nuances of its various exercises.

Opportunities for Further Research

Graduate student applicant writing samples strongly suggest that many entering students do not possess the necessary academic writing strengths to advance in their graduate studies and professional careers. It behooves institutions of higher education therefore to deliberately design and provide adult learners with an authentic writing program or process based on sound research. Therefore, recommendations for further research include

1. An in-depth review and critical analysis of initial interview writing samples using a validated writing rubric to develop a matrix or scale on which to place students.
2. An action research design study to compare students' writing before and after a Six-Traits Writing intervention, such as the one described in this chapter.
3. A qualitative study that monitors and analyzes student "writing logs" over time to determine cycles or patterns that surface as writing strengths materialize.

Adult academic writing rarely escapes the need for revision or improvement—whether it be the small details or the larger fluency issues. As academic writing and research instructors, it is our responsibility to keep our students' potential in our sights and actively facilitate its full realization.

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