
Book Reviews

Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write

Helen Sword, Harvard University Press (2017) (266 pages).
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An instructor in my graduate program suggested I read Helen Sword's book *Stylish Academic Writing* (2012) because it would help me with writing my dissertation. I devoured the book and found it to be tremendously helpful. Fortunately for me and other academics who struggle with writing, Sword has written a new book, *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write* (2017). The first part of the title comes from a poem by the same name by Charles Bukowski. He described the ideal working environment for writers and other artists who crave an ideal workspace. Sadly, as many readers of *OnCUE Journal* will agree, our teaching loads and administrative duties rob us of valuable writing time, and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic has brought additional challenges. However, many productive writers and researchers manage to produce great works in less ideal environments and circumstances than our own. Sword does not provide a blueprint for academic success, but through her tips, the reader can construct a customizable building plan. (Individual results will vary.)

For this book, she asked researchers across various disciplines around the world about their writing habits. For some researchers that Sword talked to, English was their first language. For others, it was their second or even third. From these researchers' responses, Sword gleaned habits that other researchers in

any discipline can adopt when writing.

Thanks to Sword's empirical approach, she was able to put several persistent myths to rest. One of which is the erroneous belief that academics must write conservatively and conventionally or risk professional failure. Sword's conclusion was that there is no perfect one-size-fits-all approach. For example, some prolific writers prefer "binge-writing" for hours on end, others prefer "snack writing" for short snatches when they have some time.

Sword took a no-nonsense and empirical approach to gathering data. First, she surveyed 1,223 participants in writing workshops she had conducted over the years. Three topics that were covered in both surveys and interviews were about learning to write, daily habits, and emotions related to writing. Responses from workshop participants formed a baseline of what novice writers looked like. Next, over a period of four years, in addition to conducting these surveys, Sword interviewed 100 exemplary researchers who work in a variety of disciplines, including biology, history, economics and public affairs. She compared these experts' responses to those of the aforementioned novice workshop participants. She weaved these researchers' stories with her own experiences and offers solutions to troubles researchers face with writing, such as dealing with perfectionism or having to write in a second or third language.

The book has four parts representing a different type of writing habit: behavioral, artisanal, social, and emotional. By artisanal habits, Sword means how much researchers polish and tinker as they write. Examples of artisanal habits that Sword recommended include learning to write by teaching it to a mentee or reading about writing. Social habits can include writing in the company of others, which we can do in-person, or virtually, online. One helpful online community I have discovered is Focusmate.com, a website that pairs users with others around the world who want to commit to working on a task for 50 minutes.

Each part of Sword's book has three chapters covering aspects of these types of habits. Each chapter contains stories from writers and these descriptions illustrate how to incorporate healthy writing habits. Each chapter ends with a list of practical strategies for the reader to try out. For developing good behavioral

habits, for example, Sword recommends creating an attractive workspace. For developing good artisanal habits, she recommends L1 and L2 users exchange manuscripts so that L1 users can offer L2 users support in English-language writing, and in exchange, L2 users can give L1 users critical feedback on content. For developing good social habits, she suggests forming a writing group. For developing good emotional habits, she recommends some books that describe the pleasurable aspects of writing.

The book has numerous strengths. The biggest strength is that Sword offers her readers hope. I have struggled with many aspects of writing, and after reading Sword's book, I now feel confident that I have more arrows in my quiver that can help me at least marginally improve behavioral, artisanal, social, and emotional aspects of writing as I complete my dissertation research. Through Sword's accounts of interviews with "successful" researchers, we can expect that any reader can benefit from incorporating effective writing habits into their writing practice. In this way, I feel that readers can work steadily towards developing good writing habits and eventually become more effective writers.

If I had to identify one weakness of Sword's book, however, it would be that she places an unnecessary emphasis on positive emotions. In Chapter 10: The pleasure principle, she states that the 100 interview participants (the exemplary researchers) were more likely than survey participants (the experienced but not expert writers) to feel only positive emotions when writing. Expecting to experience positive emotions is unrealistic because human beings cannot realistically expect to feel good all the time when writing. Writing should be engaging; it does not have to be fun. When experiencing flow, we enter "a mental state of extremely rewarding concentration [...] between frustration and boredom" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). This state is characterized by the absence of emotion. In other words, it does not have to be fun to be fun. However, we can take Sword's comparison of experts and novices to mean that as writers gain mastery, they might learn to enjoy the process more.

The book need not be read from cover to cover. Readers can take the diagnostic quiz in the introduction and evaluate which types of habits to develop. There are four questions that correspond to the four types of habits

covered in the book. Sword provides descriptors and readers rate themselves on each category on a scale of one to ten.

I recommend this book to researchers who struggle with good writing habits. Additionally, foreign language teachers appreciate the social nature of language learning. We know that our students learn a foreign language by communicating with others, and thus we can easily extrapolate and remember that the foreign language teacher can improve their writing by writing with and for others as well. The section on social habits would be most useful for foreign language teachers in particular, but modeling any positive writing habits might help the foreign language teacher feel empathy towards their students and ideally, teachers will be able to become role models to students.

References

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