

# Students can write: Making writing tasks relevant and personal can bring out hidden skills.

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A common complaint about student writing is that it is often very poor. Students don't understand grammar, don't know how to spell, don't know what paragraphs are for, don't understand how to reference... and so on. **James Hartley** writes that all of this is often true – but that it needn't be. In one experiment, students wrote much more clearly when the formal requirements of academic essay writing were lifted.



In academic writing two particular things that cause students difficulties in writing are:

1. the particular *requirements* of the piece – essay, project, lab. report, reflection, etc. – and
2. the supposed '*rules of the game*' for each genre.

Textbooks have been written on both of these topics. In this blog I provide four examples of where student writing is often better than expected.

## **Example 1. Students can write differently according to the 'rules of the game'.**

Asking the same students to carry out different kinds of writing tasks shows that many difficulties are inherent in the nature of the task. To illustrate: John Hegarty and I recently examined the readability of essays and reports written by 13 third-year psychology students following a second-year course on Life-Course Studies. The essays were of the typical kind – 2,000 words on the nature of life-course studies. The reports were more different – these same students had to write some 2,000 words describing successive interviews with an older person in order to write his/her life history. These texts had to be published in Kindle format with text and illustrations, and they were presented to the individuals concerned when they were completed.

We measured the readability of the students' essays and reports using the Flesch Reading Ease Score. This somewhat crude – but widely used test combines measures of the lengths of words and sentences in order to predict the reading difficulty of samples of text in terms of a reading age. The scores go from 0 – 100 where 0 is incomprehensible at any age and 100 is extremely easy and suitable for very young children. Computer based measures of the Flesch are readily available and were used in our study. [If you want to try one on your text (or someone else's) then Google <https://readability-score.com/> ]

The results below show the Reading Ease scores for our 13 students for their essays and reports.

	Essays	Reports
<b>Men (N = 3)</b>	20.3	46.1
<b>Women (N=10)</b>	34.4	62.4

Clearly, these students wrote much more clearly when the formal requirements of academic essay writing were lifted. Indeed, there was no overlap between the scores: every student wrote their report in a clearer form than their essay.

### **Example 2. Students can write for other students.**

Another way of involving students in academic writing is to get them to write for their fellow students. In 1993-4 I persuaded six students to put together a text for fellow students in the following year. The text, *The Psychology of Learning: Readings for Psychology 203*, contained eight chapters – six by the student – and an introduction and conclusion written by me. The nature of such texts, the contents of each chapter, and early drafts were discussed weekly by the students – and the chapters were then revised by the lead students concerned. I edited the final versions the text – published by the Student's Union – which was sold the following year at £5.00 per copy. It was used as a course textbook for three years (see Hartley 1998. "Why shouldn't student write their own textbook? A case-history in authentic learning." In Radford, J., Van Laar, D. & Rose, D. (Eds.) *Innovations in psychology teaching*).

The sad part of this tale, however, is that I was prevented by the bean counters from asking questions about writing textbooks in the then compulsory end-of-course examination. Here I had to focus on the topics covered, and not the issues of academic writing. The students were not amused.



**University students take a final during the 1930s. Hamline University CC BY-SA**

### **Example 3. Students can write for publication.**

There is much debate between tutors and postgraduate students about whether or not they can or should try to publish from their theses before submitting them. In 2009, Lucy Betts and I examined the experiences and attitudes of [58 postgraduate psychology students](#) about this, one-third of whom were non-native speakers of English.

We found that 32 of these 58 students (58%) had published papers before submitting their theses, and all 32 of them recommended that others should do the same. They also reported that (compared to the others) they had received significantly more support from their supervisors. However, there was a downside in that the actual submission of their theses was delayed on average by four weeks.

Undergraduates, too, of course, can publish works based upon their final year dissertations and again this is normally done with the advice and help of the supervisor. [Weber \(2002\)](#) presents accounts from different authors about different aspects of student publishing – such as publishing papers, journals, and publishing on the internet and via e-mail. Some student-led publications have been highly cited ([Griffiths 2015](#)).

#### **Example 4. Students can write blogs.**

Many university departments today require students to write blogs and claim that exam scores are enhanced by this activity. Few, however, have provided actual evidence for this effect. One exception is Steven Curtis (see [Curtis, et al. 2009](#) and [Curtis 2013](#)). Curtis examines the effects of blogging in different circumstances (e.g., blogging to fellow students; to tutors; worldwide) but even he has not yet contributed any data on the effects of blogging on examination scores.

In conclusion, student writing need not be as difficult as it appears. Making the task relevant and personal brings out hidden skills.

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

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