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# Introduction

Are you minding your writing? Are you deliberately taking the myriad decisions that academic writing asks you to take? Do you know yourself as a writer well enough? Not at all, or not as much as you wish? I thought so. Why else would you pick up this book?

Don't feel ashamed. We all have our writing weaknesses that we don't want to look at too closely – or that someone else will detect. Don't hide yourself, because that won't make your situation any better. As painful as it might be, looking at your writing weaknesses – as well as strengths – with an analytical and professional gaze will make you a better writer.

Yes, you read that correctly: *professional*. Professionals analyze what works and what doesn't work for them in order to find solutions for better performance in the future. Whether it's business, music, sports or writing, you can always improve something that didn't work out the way that you thought it should. Instead of dwelling on your hopes, high or low expectations or day dreams, let's pause for a minute or two and get down to the problem and solve it. This is what professionals do; this is what you should do. The alternative of acting as if you had no problems and carrying on as usual wouldn't sound alluring, if you knew what could potentially await you: the pain of writing, frustration, anxiety, guilt, stress, pressure and far more unsatisfying mental states. Get hold of yourself and

accept reality. Let's be frank and clear: you need to know what you're doing when writing.

## Who can benefit from this book and how will it help them?

If you're reading this, I expect that you're one of the following: a student in an institution of higher education, a PhD candidate, a postdoctoral researcher, an established researcher, or any other kind of serious and/or professional writer. They tend to be my primary audience; at its core, their writing includes some sort of researching and processing of information. They engage in communicating new knowledge that others will work with and react to.

I will ask you some of the most fundamental and simple questions about writing and being a professional writer. These are the questions that I ask my clients in counseling sessions and workshops. Regardless of whether they are first-year bachelor students, PhD candidates or established professors with years of writing experience – they all profit from answering these questions, and so will you. With these questions I want to initiate a reflexive process that lets you take a step back from your actual work. This will help you to see what is going on in your writing life and what needs improvement or radical change. Having thought about the questions, including others that may occur to you during this process, you will change how you think about writing and about yourself as a writer. You will establish a solid base (but not inflexible, mind) upon which you can learn, improve and grow in the future.

After reading this book you may end up like some of my clients: they may not remember exactly what the counseling session or workshop was about (or my name, for that matter), but they will be haunted by the questions and the answers that they discovered for themselves. To be honest with you, I sometimes have to remind myself of some of the insights I have gained in the past, in order to solve a problem (sometimes my girlfriend takes on this task in a rather unsentimental tone).

I want you to have your own individual answers to these fundamental questions for long term use. Your answers should help to make you a skilled and flexible writer, meaning that you can adapt to different writing situations and deal with any writing problem that may come your way. As a byproduct, you will become a more satisfied and happier writer who enjoys the challenge that writing poses. No longer will you perceive writing as some version of your own personal hell; writing will become an obstacle course that you know you can master. This will feel different, I can guarantee you that.

In short, I want you to take full responsibility for your writing. Take charge and make decisions, instead of relying on others who might have the noblest of intentions but don't have the answers or solutions you need. What the writing process looks like, how and why you take writing decisions, and how you act and feel as a writer is entirely up to you. Because, in the end, it's you who has to defend your texts; nobody else will be responsible for what you have chosen to do (except your co-authors, who are equally invested, of course).

## What you can expect from this book

I will keep it as short and as concise as possible. You shouldn't spend more time reading this book than necessary. You should rather read about what you need in order for you to get going and then return to your writing. That's why I suggest that you read this book selectively: pick what you need and move on. Don't feel guilty if you don't end up reading the book from cover to cover.

In discussing the questions and their possible answers, I will be drawing on the experience of my clients and other writers (including myself). Sharing others' experiences may help you reflect your own problems and solutions. Apart from that, the examples should show you that you aren't alone. Everybody faces writing challenges from time to time. Acknowledging that may lift your spirits – “a problem shared...” and all that. It may also help you to avoid doubting your own character or psyche. Since all writers have struggled with writing, it's fair to conclude that it isn't because every writer is incompetent or dumb, but because writing is intrinsically a difficult and complex thing to do (see Zinsser 2006).