

The librarian as academic author: a reflection

Writing is storytelling. In this article I share my story on how I began (and continue) to write for academic publication. Hopefully, you, the reader, will get some ideas from my experiences and suggestions and will feel motivated and enthused to write yourself. I have included some writing exercises that those new to writing may find helpful.

Keywords

Writing; publishing; libraries; case studies

Beginning to write

In 1991 I was an early career librarian grappling with writing about my experiences as a Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) lecturer in Library Science at the University of Sierra Leone. Having completed two years with VSO, in 1991 I returned to my post as a Subject Librarian at Dublin City University (DCU). I felt it was important both personally and professionally to create a record of library education in that specific time and place, before so much was destroyed by civil war. However, I had no idea of how to go about documenting that experience in a meaningful and manageable way. While I had some familiarity with library journals, I did not know anyone personally who had published and, to me, the process of writing and publishing was an unknown and somewhat scary landscape.

Initially I collected large swathes of information about Sierra Leone. (This was before personal computers and laptops.) Because I had no idea what exactly it was that I wanted to write, everything relating to Sierra Leone was potentially relevant. I had not thought about who might read what I wrote or what form it might take. Sometimes I thought it would be an article. Other times I contemplated doing a Master's degree in Development Studies and using my notes in a thesis. The possibility of a book about Sierra Leone also drifted through my mind. One year on and I had a bulging file of articles, a blue notebook full of notes and a shelf full of books about Sierra Leone. I had not started to write anything specific, rather I had accumulated lots and lots of information. Somehow in the process I forgot that the most interesting story was in fact my own lived experience.

Going through a box of letters from my former students, I came across a 'Bon Voyage' card they had given me. I could associate a face with each signature. I thought, 'Time will pass and I won't remember all these people, and the experiences we shared together. Maybe I should just write my experience.' That was what I did and this was my first encounter with practice-based writing. Now I always say to those aspiring to write that they should value their own experience. I was really encouraged in my writing endeavours by the then DCU Library Director, Dr Alan MacDougall, and his wife, Jennifer. She had grown up in Ghana and had a personal interest in libraries in West Africa. At that time few Irish librarians were publishing and those that were tended to be at senior levels. There was no expectation to publish and my writing – as I suspect was the case with the few Irish librarians who were writing – was done outside work. Their encouragement gave me the courage to send my article, now 5,000 words and based on my experience as a lecturer in Sierra Leone, to *An Leabharlann: The Irish Library*. Following a positive



HELEN FALLON

Deputy Librarian
Maynooth University
Library

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2 response from the editor, the subsequent publication of my first academic article was a source of great joy to me.¹ This made me realize that I did not need to be a senior librarian in order to publish. I just needed to be committed to putting the time and effort into writing and, through the process, to learn and develop my writing skills. Shifting my thinking from believing I had to find out as much as possible about a topic through reviewing the literature, to beginning with my practice, worked for me.

Why write?

Teaching at the University of Sierra Leone, I was very conscious of the lack of any modern textbooks or journals in library and information studies. Thanks to the open access (OA) movement, people can now access a vast body of literature regardless of their location and economic status. Writing is a way of sharing experiences and creating new knowledge and OA contributes substantially to equalizing access to this.

The writing process itself can help clarify thinking through exploring, developing and articulating ideas and experience, as shown by the Writing to Learn Movement (WTL).² Similarly, in *Getting Published*, Gina Wisker suggests that writing helps explore, develop and articulate our ideas and experience and in the process come up with new ideas.³ New thinking and approaches to topics and situations are vital for a vibrant library profession.

In some institutions, particularly in the USA, publishing is a requirement for librarians to achieve tenure. Where there is no formal requirement to publish, as is often the case for librarians, having published can enhance your curriculum vitae. A publishing record will also assist if applying for fellowship or qualification from another professional body.

If you are going to write, it is very likely you are going to have to deal with rejection from time to time. That has certainly been my experience. The peer-review process has helped me develop my confidence, perseverance and resilience: all good life skills.

If you work in an academic institution, your publications will count as part of the institution's publishing output. This is likely to be viewed favourably and may also help increase the visibility of the library and create a recognition of the library as a creator of scholarship, rather than solely as a curator and disseminator.

'The mingling of perspectives in written output can result in mutual learning'

Writing with people from other disciplines, in addition to the value of creating connections, helps explore topics in different contexts. Lecturing staff share concerns with library staff on a range of topics including reading lists and information skills, albeit from different perspectives. The mingling of perspectives in written output can result in mutual learning.

If you publish on current topics and make your work visible through depositing in an OA repository and publicising on social media, you may develop a reputation in a particular area and be invited to present papers at conferences, or you can respond to calls for papers. Through presenting at conferences you can expand your peer group and get new ideas from the people you meet.

'Starting to write can be daunting. The best thing is to just do it!'

There can be significant personal and professional development through writing and I find there is also a sense of satisfaction to be gained from creating a narrative or story.

Starting to write

Starting to write can be daunting. The best thing is to just do it! Writing is about writing, not about thinking or talking about writing. There is never going to be a good time. Why not begin now by trying Task 1 below.

Task 1. The why of writing

Write a short paragraph (no more than 60 words) telling why you write or wish to write. Spend about ten minutes on this task.

3 A prompt can help focus the mind when sitting down to write.

Task 2. Writing to prompt

Generally I do this in a notebook rather than at the computer. Try the following task:

Write for ten minutes, without stopping, in sentences not bullets.

Begin with *one* of the following prompts:

- I am interested in writing about ...
- An area of my research which I would like to write about is ...
- I feel at my most creative when I'm writing about ...

Don't worry about punctuation. If it helps, leave out punctuation and use words such as 'and', 'then' and 'but' as connectors. After ten minutes, count the number of words you have written. This is a piece of spontaneous writing – you are just jotting down whatever comes to mind – so don't consider the quality of your work. You may be surprised at the number of words you can actually write in ten minutes and this practice may give you insights into topics. However, its main function is as a warm-up exercise to help get started. Try different approaches. Make up your own prompts. Professor Rowena Murray, University of the West of Scotland (UWS), an expert on the topic of academic writing, offers useful suggestions on writing to prompt in her book *Writing for Academic Journals*.⁴

It can be helpful to do a warm-up exercise, for example: 'My next writing task is ...' each time you sit down to write, to get into the flow of writing. It can also be useful to finish a writing session with a prompt such as: 'Tomorrow my first writing task will be to...'

The novelist Ernest Hemingway always stopped writing when he felt it was going well, so that he could look forward to sitting down at his desk the following day. Knowing where you are going to start can make sitting down to write less of a chore.

In *Writing Without Teachers* Peter Elbow suggests that the most effective way to improve your writing is to do freewriting exercises – initially for ten minutes and extending to 20 – at least three times a week. 'Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out ... If you get stuck it's fine to write "I can't think what to say"'.⁵ Elbow identifies the lack of editing, evaluation and comment as crucial to the success of this type of exercise. Murray notes that 'Those who persist with freewriting, twice a week for ten minutes ... identify a wide range of benefits on, interestingly, their thinking, writing and, in some cases, general wellbeing'.⁶

Writing from practice

After publishing my first article on librarianship in Sierra Leone, I found myself thinking: 'Two years in West Africa was a bit different. What will I find to measure up to that experience to write about?' Through reading and reflecting, I realized my writing did not have to be set in an unusual location. In fact, the regular routine practice I engaged in was likely to be of more practical help to fellow librarians. So, I started to write about the things I was doing at DCU. This included a staff development programme I was involved with⁷ and a project to introduce CD-ROMs in the DCU Library.⁸ The former was published in *SCONUL Newsletter* (subsequently renamed *SCONUL Focus*), the latter in *An Leabharlann: The Irish Library*. Both of these publications were really important to me and many other Irish librarians in getting a step on the publishing ladder.

Submissions to practice-based/professional journals are usually evaluated by an editor or an editorial board and articles are typically 1,500 to 3,000 words. However, now that many journals are electronic only, the word count is often less strict. Practice-based journals value experience and frequently have a straightforward structure telling about an event or a process. The tone is generally informal and it is common to write in the first person.

- 4 Practice-based articles may have a few references and further reading: generally, they don't have extensive referencing and bibliographies. Examples of professional journals in librarianship and industry newsletters include *SCONUL Focus*, *CILIP Update*, *College and Research Library News*, *UKSG eNews* and *Ariadne Newsletter*.

A number of journals carry both professional and research articles. By reading articles in a few issues along with the submission guidelines, you will get a sense of what the journal is likely to be interested in.

Finding topics to write about

All of us are involved in interesting activities. (Though, if you are reading this and thinking, 'No, I'm not', then you may need to explore how you can get more involved in new and developing areas in your work or research and perhaps beyond, such as through engagement with professional associations and activities.) It is highly likely that you have lots of knowledge and experience that others would like to know about and, with a little effort and discipline, this knowledge and experience can be crafted into publishable articles.

I find clustering or mind mapping a good way to identify and explore topics and I often do this on any paper to hand when I have time to spare.

Task 3. Clustering/mind mapping

Pick a topic.

Write it in the centre of a piece of paper and draw a circle around it.

Surround the topic with subtopics.

Circle each and draw a line from it to the centre circle.

Brainstorm more ideas.

As you do this, connect each new concept to a subtopic already on the sheet, or make it a new subtopic.

Use the mind map to identify different aspects of your topic and to establish connections. You will probably find there are many angles to your topic. Pick one specific aspect/angle.

Now put it in the centre of a piece of paper and begin a new cluster. (See the example in Figure 1.)

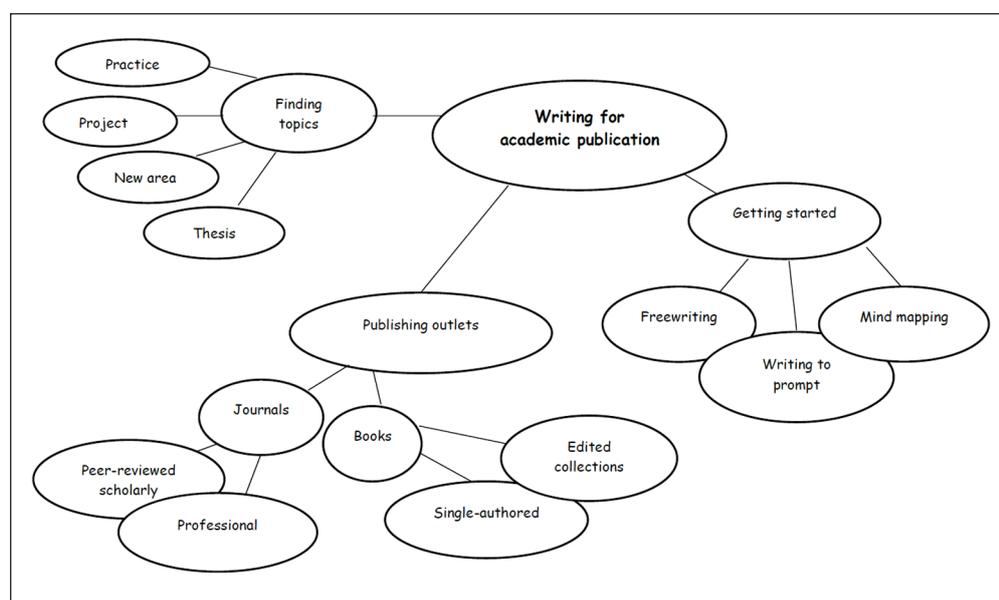


Figure 1. An example of a mind map

- 5 Writing projects often fail because they are either too broad or too ambitious for the time frame. The more focused and specific the topic, the better the chance of completion.

See Maimon for more on clustering.⁹

Ideas notebook

Buy yourself an ideas notebook, small enough to carry about with you. I started this about 25 years ago. It is surprising how much free time we actually have – time on a train journey, time drinking coffee while waiting for friends, time waiting in the doctor or dentist’s waiting room – five or ten minutes here and there, it all adds up. You don’t need lots of time to jot down ideas. You won’t use all of these. In fact, you probably won’t use many of them but it will get you into the habit of thinking about topics and teasing out ideas on paper. Remember, an idea may be somewhere at the back of your mind until you write it down. It is then shaped and reshaped and may lead somewhere quite different from where you originally envisaged.

Alternatively, use an app for recording ideas, such as Simplenote, Evernote, OneNote, Zoho Notebook or any of the myriad other products available free of charge.

‘The more focused and specific the topic, the better the chance of completion’

Data

It is helpful to consider what data you have as you explore topics to write about. You may have, or can easily obtain, some of the following: literature review, statistics, surveys, interviews, test results, quotes, photographs, reflective journals and course evaluations. Get in the habit of thinking about data in all its forms. Make yourself familiar with the ethical issues of gathering and using data and of your organization’s policy in this regard. Normally, when I run an academic writing workshop, I ask people to complete a short evaluation form, which they are not required to sign. I tell them I may use the feedback in my writing. A very straightforward way of getting feedback that I have used, particularly after short sessions, is to give each participant three Post-it notes and ask them to record: What worked? What didn’t work so well? What could be done to improve the session?

Task 4. Identifying data

Make a list of some of the data you currently have access to, aiming for perhaps five data sources.

Make a list of data you could easily obtain. Again, limit yourself to five sources.

Consider both lists.

List the possible topics you could write about drawing on some of this data.

Kennan and Olsson offer useful insights into how to use data from reports and other sources as the basis of articles.¹⁰

Reading

Reading really does help generate ideas and also helps develop writing skills.

Task 5. Strategic reading

Identify and read an article on a topic that interests you.

Jot down a few ideas on how you could develop the topic further or write about it in a different context.

Write for ten minutes, in sentences not bullets, describing how you might approach writing about this topic in a different context. Themes may be similar. Both the Russian author Leo

- 6 Tolstoy and the Irish author John McGahern wrote about family life in a time of revolution. However, *War and Peace* and *That they may face the rising sun* are very different books, because the context, the setting, the characters and the events that befall them are very different. Remember, there are very few completely new topics, mostly just new angles. Most topics have been written about already. Why would a publisher be interested in your writing on a particular topic? The answer to that is that you are writing in a particular context. This is generally the context of your experience or your organization or your research. You are describing a topic or event through your own personal lens and hopefully will bring new ideas and insights to the topic. Do you have a new angle? Can you build on what has been done before?

Writing for peer-reviewed journals

In 1996 I completed a part-time MA in Women's Studies at University College Dublin (UCD). When the department expressed an interest in publishing my thesis, which was on the timely topic of gender and the internet, I rather naively thought that this would involve some minor revision and a new cover. In fact, it required a total rewrite, which took over a year. The target audience for the book – the general public – was different from the audience for the thesis – the supervisor and external examiner. Similarly, when I saw a call for papers for an academic journal in Women's Studies, I submitted two essays which had received high marks on the course. Both were rejected and this puzzled me as I didn't understand then that writing an essay and writing a journal article were two totally different processes. Now I am on the editorial board of *New Review of Academic Librarianship (NRAL)* and I carry out peer review for this and other journals. If I am rejecting an article, I explain, as clearly as possible, why it is not suitable and give suggestions, in part because I remember my own sense of confusion and hurt at the rejection – without any indication why – of my suggested articles.

'Do you have a new angle? Can you build on what has been done before?'

In 2000 I took up the post of Deputy University Librarian at the National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM), now Maynooth University (MU). There I had different experiences, including introducing the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) programme in the Library and was again able to use my practice as the basis of articles. Familiarizing myself with the ECDL package and reviewing how effective it was in the library context was part of my regular work and I made this the basis of a conference paper and a subsequent article.¹¹ It helped that ECDL was new and a number of universities and higher education institutions were actively engaging, or seeking to engage with it. As a senior manager, I was also in a position to encourage Library staff at all grades to present at conferences, write for publication and to help to create an environment that encouraged, over a number of years, a very high level of presenting and publishing for Library staff at all grades.¹²

After a number of years writing experience-based articles for publications such as *An Leabharlann: The Irish Library*, *SCONUL Focus* and *Adults Learning*, I attended a one-day writing workshop at MU. This was facilitated by Murray, who encouraged me to progress from writing for professional journals to writing for peer-reviewed journals. Despite initial concern that I would not have the knowledge of research methods or the data to do this, I realized from talking with Murray and others who were writing and from reading journal articles that I could use my practice as the basis for peer-reviewed articles. This was a real breakthrough for me. Using my work experiences as the starting point for my writing has meant I don't need to spend long periods researching a new topic, rather I develop lived work experience into case studies. These case studies are grounded in the literature of a topic and thus have a research basis.

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Walkey Hall offers interesting insights into how library staff at Flinders University transitioned from practice to research-based writing, and the supports necessary to do this.¹³

7 Peer-reviewed journals have a longer lead-in time and generally longer articles than professional journals, often over 5,000 words. The tone also tends to be more formal than in professional journals, but this varies so it is important to read articles and look at the guidelines and the style in the journal you are considering. Articles generally go through a formal double-blind peer-review process, which involves two reviewers whose identity is not revealed to the writer. Examples of peer-reviewed journals in librarianship include a number of journals published by Emerald and Taylor & Francis, *Insights: the UKSG journal*, *Journal of Academic Librarianship* and *Library Quarterly*. The LIS Publications Wiki created by Laurie Putman is a useful resource for identifying scholarly and professional publications.¹⁴

Some journals have a mixture of peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed content. Book reviews, conference reports and opinion pieces do not go through the formal double-blind peer-review process.

Task 6. Structure of a peer-reviewed article

Identify a peer-reviewed article on a topic of your choice in a peer-reviewed journal.

Look at the structure, paying particular attention to the headings used.

List the headings you might use in an article on your chosen topic.

Writing across disciplines

As my confidence grew, I decided to write about library-related issues aimed at discipline-specific as well as library-specific journals. This was influenced by interactions with lecturers – my best interactions and ideas frequently coming from informal coffee or lunch break meet-ups. I realized that while many academic staff were experts in their discipline, frequently they were not expert at sourcing information relating to their discipline and information about the scholarship of teaching and learning in their discipline. I was fortunate to be asked by Professor Rowena Murray to contribute a chapter, on finding information relating to teaching and learning in various disciplines, to her book *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*.¹⁵ From that experience, and particularly from interacting with other contributors to the book, I learned a significant amount about the information-seeking behaviour of academics. Writing with academic colleagues promotes shared learning. Librarians have valuable insights into a wide range of information and discipline-related topics which are of concern to academic staff, sometimes from a different perspective. Exploring these differing perspectives in a mutually respectful manner and sharing knowledge can help highlight and advance issues such as open access, information literacy, maximizing research visibility and developing collections of excellence. This exploration and sharing can help to make the Library more visible and vital to the academic community. Writing a peer-reviewed article with a Professor of Adult Education on integrating a unique and distinctive collection into the undergraduate curriculum was a learning experience for both of us.¹⁶ In addition to all the positive factors of writing together, there were challenges, particularly the challenge of not straying too far outside the library context, as the target journal was in the field of librarianship, not adult education.

'Writing with academic colleagues promotes shared learning'

Where to publish

It is best not to write a complete article or book and then try to find a publisher. I would not write a conference paper, for example, on the chance that a conference on a specific topic would come up.

When writing an article, always write with the audience in mind.

'When writing an article, always write with the audience in mind'

Task 7. Defining audience and purpose

Answer each of the following questions in 50 or fewer words:

- What is the audience for my writing?
- What is the purpose of my writing?

There may be a variety of audiences and your audience will influence your style of writing.

Anecdotal evidence suggests the most common reason for rejection of articles by journal editors is that they are not suitable for the journal. Knowing your audience and purpose before you start will, to a large extent, determine the type of article you write and your choice of journal. The scope and requirements of the journal will help you shape and structure your writing.

Writing a book requires a totally different structure from that of an article. An article is not a cut-down or abridged version of a book. Books are generally commissioned and most book publishers will have a template for a book proposal on their website. Chapter 6 of the *Handbook of Academic Writing for Librarians* offers guidance on publishing books and edited collections.¹⁷

It is best to send a query e-mail to the publisher before submitting a proposal. Book chapters usually result from a call for chapters and these types of calls are frequently posted on social media. Guidelines for proposals are generally included in the post. If your proposal is accepted, you will get detailed guidelines on submission.

'Getting into the habit of writing regularly is key to success'

Finding time to write

It is possible to develop productive academic writing practices through writing for short periods on a regular basis. Getting into the habit of writing regularly is key to success and for those not in a position to write during the working day, or where time is allocated but it is limited, it is probably the only way to get some writing done. As part of developing a writing habit, it can be useful to write at the same time each day. Generally, but of course not always, people are at their most productive in terms of writing, in the morning.¹⁸ Consider whether you can get up half an hour earlier in the morning, to write. Try to write in the same location if possible. Pretty soon this will become a routine. Perhaps try to achieve three mornings a week and build that to four after a month.

Murray distinguishes between short and longer periods of writing, referring to 'snack' and 'sandwich' writing – the snack being the shorter period (15 to 30 minutes), the sandwich the longer period.¹⁹ These longer periods are necessary to get into the flow of writing. World expert on creativity, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, suggests that it takes 15 minutes to get into a state of flow when completing an activity that requires a level of effort.²⁰ He suggests that with practice, people get into this state of flow more easily. I often sit down reluctantly, with the goal of writing for 15 minutes, and find myself still writing an hour later. This illustrates that writing generates ideas and you have to write in order to get to those ideas which are within you. Don't wait for a 'good time' to write. Set aside a short period of time, ideally each day, to sit down and write.

'you have to write in order to get to those ideas which are within you'

Think about your day and how you might build this time into it. Make a regular date with yourself and treat this time as valuable as you would a meeting with a close friend. Don't check your mobile phone or e-mail. These distractions will impede flow. Keep writing time for writing, not for research or reading.

'Keeping a record of time spent writing has been shown to increase productivity'

Keeping a record of time spent writing has been shown to increase productivity. A study of writing practices of academic staff at New Mexico State University found that participants increased their output threefold, when keeping a daily record.²¹ Your record could be as simple as jotting down the date and time. Alternatively, there are a number of electronic tools for this and Dessler briefly reviews a number of free apps for record keeping and blocking out distractions for set periods.²²

Task 8. Scheduling writing

Plan to have three 20-minute writing sessions over the next seven days.

Make a note of the specific dates and times.

At the end of the week, review your time spent writing. Did you succeed in writing for 20 minutes on three days? If yes, write a few sentences about how you found this process. If not, write a few sentences about why you didn't/couldn't do this.

Conclusion

Beginning and continuing to write is challenging. Writing can be a lonely process and writing groups can help provide a support network. An article by Campbell et al. explores the benefits of writing groups for librarians²³ and my writing blog aims to support librarians in their publishing endeavours. It offers links to resources for workshops, details of publishing opportunities and insights from editors and published authors.²⁴

Day's comment in *How to Get Research Published in Journals* probably resonates with many of us:

'The reason many aspiring authors fail is that they throw themselves immediately into the activity of writing without realizing it is the forethought, analysis and preparation that determine the quality of the finished product.'²⁵

There are plenty of books, some already mentioned, and several journal articles that offer useful insights into writing processes and the practical aspects of writing. Books on academic writing specifically for the library profession include Crawford,²⁶ Gordon,²⁷ Langley and Wallace²⁸ and Hollister.²⁹ Articles in various LIS journals include Gordon,³⁰ Joint,³¹ Fallon,³² McKnight,³³ Brewerton³⁴ and Cox.³⁵

However, it is important to remember that writing is about *writing*, not reading about writing, and the first step is getting pen to paper or your fingers on the keyboard.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>

Competing interests

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Helen Fallon
Deputy Librarian
Maynooth University Library,
Maynooth, Co. Kildare, IE
E-mail: helen.b.fallon@mu.ie | @helenfallon
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6249-9797>

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