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Recommended Citation

McQuillan, D., Abdou, R., Corbett, K. and Hack, E. (2022) Essays on Good Practice in Academic Writing: A comparison across business disciplines. Technological University Dublin, DOI: 10.21427/k5fv-8n92

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Essays on Good Practice in Academic Writing: A comparison across business disciplines

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This is a series of essays to support PhD students and early career researchers within the field of business. By delving into a cross disciplinary perspective on academic writing in the business domain, researchers will better understand differences for writing. Essay 1 highlights what is important for writing in economics. Essay 2 adopts a different approach by arguing for more pluralism and applied approaches when writing in Human Resource Management. The essay opens up new possibilities and opportunities for PhD students and early career researchers interested in more applied approaches. Essay 3 guides qualitative researchers writing in sports management where quantitative approaches have dominated and new perspectives are needed.

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Introduction

Most literature on academic writing adopts a fairly generic view of good practices. Papers offer general advice but fail to sufficiently acknowledge that such good practices may vary across business disciplines (Hyland, 2002). This assumption however has been heavily criticized (Hyland, 2002; Zhu, 2004).

Scholars warn against the promotion of this homogenous view of academic writing. Hyland (2002, p. 392) argues that this view *"misleads learners into believing that they simply have to master a set of rules which can be transferred across fields''.* By the same token, Zhu (2004, p.38) suggests that "*academic writing involved more than the simple transfer of general writing skills and would require writers to have specific knowledge about disciplinary thought and communication processes".* Wingate and Tribble (2012, p.481) contributes to the debate by highlighting that "*learning to write in an academic discipline is not a purely linguistic matter that can be fixed outside the discipline, but involves an understanding of how knowledge in the discipline is presented, debated and constructed".*

These studies recognise that teaching academic writing in higher education needs to be situated within the students' own disciplinary contexts (Gimenez, 2016). This perspective has its foundation in the belief that the role of academic writing can be understood if it is perceived by academic writers as a social practice, in the context where it is produced (Bazerman & Prior, 2003). It is important to promote specificity in writing, doing and knowing within disciplines rather than a 'one size fits all' approach (Carter, 2007; Hyland, 2002).

Within schools of business however, it is unfortunate that this recognized need for specificity has had little impact on the approach to teaching academic writing (Wingate & Tribble, 2012).

The majority of business colleges appear to offer courses or workshops where academic writing is taught as a general set of skills and practices to students of all disciplines. This does not consider that business discipline caters to a wide array of fields, such as Accounting and Finance, Economics, Management, Marketing, and Human Resources Management (HRM). This leads to specific challenges for early career researchers, including PhD students, whereby from a pedagogical point of view it creates obstacles in their development of academic writing skills.

Within schools and colleges of business, better insight is needed on how to balance what is transversal and what is specific to scholars writing within various business disciplines. This paper presents a series of essays that explore this phenomenon. The aim of the paper is to draw out similarities and tensions through using three exemplars of business disciplines – economics, human resource management, and sports management. While economics and human resource management fall into the category of more traditional business disciplines, sports management is a more specialised exemplar that enriches the transferability of our explanations and insights in terms of arguing for generic or heterogeneous inputs into academic writing courses for business students and early career staff.

Reviewing practices across these three business disciplines, this review will elucidate similarities and differences that can provide a more informed base to design pedagogical practices.

Essay 1: Good Practices for Academic Writing in Economics

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Until the 1960s, economics papers were most likely based on developing economic theories and theoretical models. This was when status by peers was attached to being a theorist (Backhouse & Cherrier, 2017). During this time, quantitative analysis was regarded with more suspicion (Mitchell, 1925), with very low expectations on its ability to solve fundamental economic problems. In stark contrast, Backhouse & Cherrier (2017) suggest that during the latter decades of the twentieth century scholars turned more to applied economics. Economists today conduct sophisticated empirical analysis and are counted amongst the most prestigious in their field. The authors further argue that this "empirical turn" may be explained by two important factors. Firstly, the more recent approach addresses longstanding criticism about economics being disconnected from the real world. Leontief (1971) is among the early economists who bluntly argued against economics theory and models. At the core of his arguments, the fact that the fundamentals of economic models are based on unrealistic assumptions hardly applied to the real world.

A second reason for the shift lies in the continuous advancement of computer technology, the evolution of more robust econometrics techniques, as well as the large economic datasets made accessible to researchers, such as economic surveys data, administrative databases, and timely financial market data. Today, it is highly unlikely that top economic journals will publish papers without sophisticated econometric analysis.

In economics, the quantitative nature of the discipline influences its good practices. The majority of economic research primarily aims to answer an economic question using economic data and drawing a conclusion based on the results obtained from conducting econometric

analysis (Neugeboren, 2005). In accordance with this aim, Hansen (2001) note that one of the key proficiencies an economics major should demonstrate is to interpret and manipulate economic data. In the same vein, Field, Wachter, & Catanese (1985) demonstrate that to write in economics, one has to be equipped with economic-related competencies and skills. Given that economics is a quantitative/statistical discipline, a researcher in economics has to demonstrate competencies in problem-solving skills, analytical skills, good writing and quantitative reasoning to deal with graphs, tables and maths (Field et al., 1985). In fact, Dudenhefer (2009) in his prescriptive book on how to write in economics, emphasises the importance of the empirical section of economic papers. He explains that the writing process of economic papers is likely to be an inside out process. In other words, the researcher starts by conducting the empirical analysis " the most inner spot of the paper", writes the empirical section of the paper, and then progress to write the introduction and conclusion sections. Nevertheless, Dudenhefer (2009) acknowledges that there are alternative ways to write economics research papers.

Publishing in Top Economic Journals

The discourse of "publish or perish" pervades the academic business field (Bozeman & Youtie, 2016), and economics is no exception. It is widely perceived within the economics discipline that publishing in leading economic journals is mandatory to establish an academic identity and to validate one's own research. Consequently, for a researcher to publish in the leading economic journals, he/she has to comply with the good practices for publishing in the economics discipline. As discussed above, the empirical section of an economic research paper is the tool of the trade. Recently, quantitative-based research published in leading business journals has been criticised for lacking validity. This urges a recent editorial in The Journal of International Business studies by Meyer, Witteloostuijn, & Beugelsdijk (2017) to develop a guideline for good practices for conducting, reporting, and discussing empirical results. At the

core of their guideline is the emphasis that authors should enhance the transparency and ensure the replicability of their empirical findings. As noted by Meyer, Witteloostuijn, & Beugelsdijk (2017: p.535) " This will not only help readers to assess empirical evidence comprehensively, but also enable subsequent research to build a cumulative body of empirical knowledge."

Authorial Voice

There has been much debate on integrating a personal voice into academic writing across disciplines, raising doubts about its good practice (Hyland, 2002). Research investigating the specific conventions and practices with respect to the use of the author's own voice suggests that researchers in economics tend to establish their authorial position by emphasising and promoting the novelty, originality, and robustness of their empirical findings. Tutin (2010) calls this way of establishing authority the *"marketized"* style", given that researchers self-promote the importance of their own research. A linguistic analysis of the academic economic discourse revealed the extensive use of evaluative adjectives ascertaining originality, novelty and importance compared to other academic disciplines (Tutin 2010). Additionally, authors tend to cite their peers' work to show knowledge of the extant literature and position themselves among their peers in the field. Indeed, the submission policy for American Economic Review (AER), a leading economic journal, states that *"All submitted papers must also represent original work, and should fully reference and describe all prior work on the same subject and compare the submitted paper to that work."* To this extent, it seems that the good practice with respect to integrating a personal voice in economic discourse neither pertains to the standpoint that economic discourse should omit one's own voice (Arnaudet & Barrett 1984), nor to the viewpoint suggesting that one's own opinion should be strongly present into academic writing (Ivanic, 1997), but rather stands in between these two opinions. Based on this, authors of economics papers tend to subordinate their own views and opinions to that of their findings to promote scientific objectivity and yet establish their own authorial voice. According to Hyland

(2002), this way of establishing an authorial voice is more close to that adopted in hard sciences.

The analogy between the academic discourse of economics and hard sciences has also been detected by previous research. Parodi (2015) demonstrates that economics papers are dominated by graphs and mathematical equations similar to the discourse of basic sciences, such as physics. At the same time, they are also characterised by the persuasive and narrative type of academic writing closer to the discourse in the social sciences and humanities.

Academic Writing

Research that concerns writing in economics primarily focuses on those related to conducting and reporting empirical results even though the importance of good academic writing cannot be overstated (Schmeiser, 2017). Empirical findings need to be written up in order to communicate to the academic community. McCloskey (2000, p.5) advocates the importance of good writing in economics by stating that *"Economics depends much more on writing (and on speaking, another neglected art) than on the statistics and mathematics usually touted as the tools of the trade"*. Schmeiser (2017) further argues that good writing is a reflection of good thinking and reasoning. On the other hand, Smith, Broughton, and Copley (2005) and Laband and Taylor (1992) suggest that bad economic writing reflects illogical economic thinking and adversely affect the acceptance of the writer's ideas within the scientific community. McCloskey (2000, p.7) explains that *"You do not learn the details of an argument until writing it in detail, and in writing the details you uncover flaws in the fundamentals".* Therefore, good academic writing in economics adheres to the widely-agreed key characteristics of good academic writing practices, that is academic writing has to be clear, persuasive, accurate and concise (Neugeboren, 2005). To sum, good practices in writing in

economics and good practices in conducting and reporting economic analysis go hand in hand and together lead to writing excellence in the economics discipline.

Essay 2: The problem of elite HRM journals in side-lining real issues

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This essay offers a critique of traditional human resource management and in particular the pressures put on early career academics and doctoral students to publish in the top journals. The author argues that the obsession with theory and contributing to theory is blinding researchers to the important real life problems that they should be concerned helping to solve. The essay demonstrates how multidisciplinary approaches, even within the business domain solve real world problems. Warning is also given however about too much emphasis on models. The aim of the essay is to show other opportunities and possibilities by combining disciplines and adopting more applied approaches to writing in HRM.

Sidelining the major issues – a need for more pluralistic and grounded approaches

Many scholars criticise the prevailing approach to writing in HRM and call for more methodological pluralism, asserting that researchers, academic institutions and journals each have a role to play in promoting viable alternatives. Tourish (2020) proposes to make changes in our mind-sets and journal practices to restore some sense of deeper purpose to what HR academics do. He laments the fact that although there is obviously much to be said for good theory, the need to "develop theory" has become a condition of publication by our elite journals to a greater extent than can be found in other disciplines. This Tourish argues sidelines major issues in the profusion of theorising – for example, key journals have published very few papers that explore the role of management in the Great Recession of 2008. There is much support for a need to regain some sense of proportionate effort in academic writing within HRM.

In a similar vein, McKiernan and Tsui (2019) advocate for research that tackles important issues and seeks to make a difference. Peters & Thomas (2020) illustrate the problem by

example, asking how many Chief Executives base their strategies on theories gained from a management journal. The authors add to the debate by discussing the history of Business Schools with reference to Khurana (2007), Thomas, Lorange, and Sheth, (2013) and Peters, Smith and Thomas (2018). These scholars lay the perceived fault for theory development at the door of Business Schools where, they maintain, the positivist model of management education has become the dominant design despite persistent and growing criticism about the value, role, and purposes of such Schools. Harley (2015) also expresses his concern about the increasing dominance of 'scientific' research within HRM scholarship, which he declares, is characterised not only by a positivist methodology but complex statistical techniques, correlational theorising and incremental advances in knowledge.

Murphy, Klotz & Kreiner (2017) describe grounded theory as a methodology with significant (and largely untapped) potential for HR research. According to Gaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory refers to a set of strategies through which theory is generated via the simultaneous collection and analysis of data and the abductive interplay between induction and deduction. Murphy *et al*. (2017) state that the primary goal of such concurrent efforts is to build theory that is deeply informed by the data—the theoretical output can thus be said to be "grounded." They have found it to be the most commonly used qualitative method in management's leading journals and believe it to excel at exploring new (i.e., "blue sky") research domains and at providing fresh perspectives on well-trod but ill-understood (i.e., "black box") research topics. HR research has lagged other domains within management in terms of embracing grounded theory, despite prior calls for its use (Egan, 2002; Huselid, Jackson, & Schuler, 1997; Mazzola, Schonfeld, & Spector, 2011). Murphy *et al.* (2017) conclude that grounded theory has the potential to facilitate the development of new theory

that reflects how HR is being practiced today, and it has the ability to breathe new life into important, heavily studied HR topics that may have fallen by the wayside.

HRM lens as an approach to writing in other disciplines – the case for multidisciplinarity

Building on the aforementioned arguments about the need for more pluralistic and multidisciplinary approaches bringing theory closer to practice, scholars often adopt HRM approaches when writing for other disciplines. For students and early career researchers the conceptualising the multidisciplinary opportunities that exist for HRM, even within the field of business, opens up many new possibilities. This is illuminated by examining four academic papers in the disciplines of economics and sports management.

Firstly, a paper by Pudelko (2006) combining HRM and economics. Pudelko's starting point is an investigation into the managerial, economic, socio-political and cultural contexts of three HR systems in the US, Japan and Germany. The findings, although not explained in detail here, make an important contribution by showing that socio-economic context is highly pertinent for the establishment of a HR system.

Moving to the discipline of sports management, Wagner, Hansen, Kristensen, & Josty (2019) examine improving service-centre employees' performance by means of sport sponsorship. They investigate how sport sponsorship is used as a strategic means in HRM. Their study illustrates how a sport-sponsorship campaign improved competencies and teamwork among service-centre employees. A characteristic of modern sport is its ability to motivate people passionately and engage them emotionally (Smith and Stewart, 2010). Again, combining these disciplines of HRM and sports management contributes new multidisciplinary understanding for practice in sports management.

Similarly, Moore, Parkhouse and Konrad (2010), in a study of gender equality, have found that philosophical support of top managers leads to the development of substantive HRM programmes to promote gender equality in sport management and greater female manager representation. They believe that by educating top managers on the true nature of affirmative action programs, professionals in sport organizations may be able to increase support for initiatives to increase gender equality in the management hierarchy. Bradley and Forsyth (2012) in their New Zealand study affirm that good practice in HRM suggests that sports organisations should provide fair and equitable selection procedures that new hires are informed of, and that provide the greatest likelihood of success in the organisation or sports team. Again, this applied multidisciplinary approach helps to solve real world problems bringing scholars closer to practice.

Back to economics and HRM, Harley (2015) reports that in the 1980s researchers embarked on 'the search for the Holy Grail of establishing a causal relationship between HRM and performance' (Legge, 2001: 23). This research has continued to the present day and a variety of theoretical models have been employed including the dominant high performance work systems (HPWS) model (see Harley, 2005). Harley (2015) contends that mainstream HR scholars have maintained their focus on the HR–performance link, but that research has now entered a new phase, attempting to map, what he terms, 'causal paths' between HR practice and performance. The extent to which the field has narrowed its focus to where it now appears to be regarded as *the* proper way to conduct HR–performance research is a challenge. This highlights another issue in the care needed, even when working across disciplines, to produce papers that do not conform to the norms. Even though studies may be theoretically and methodologically rigorous, they should not be put forward as genuinely new arguments.

Essay 3: Pointers for qualitative approaches to academic writing in Sports Management

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Research reviewing publications in the three main Sport Management Journals, namely: *Sport Management Review*, the *Journal of Sport Management*, and *European Sport Management Quarterly* reveals less than a quarter of published works conducted using Qualitative Methods (Shaw & Hoeber, 2016). This has led to calls for Sport Management research taking on more inventive and critical approaches (Amis & Silk, 2005; Frisby, 2005; Skinner & Edwards, 2005). According to Jonsen, Fendt and Point (2017, p.31), "*Writing is perceived as central to qualitative research: how the story is experienced, (de)constructed, and proposed – and how it is in turn received and interpreted by the reader".* While considered to be a very worthwhile experience, getting one's work published in an academic journal is no easy feat, with writing-related issues included among the most universal concerns identified by Qualitative paper reviewers (Gephart, 2004; Köhler, 2016; Mitchell & Clark, 2018; Pratt, 2009; Ragins, 2012; Suddaby, 2006). This essay seeks to identify the good practices and recommendations for academic writing when conducting Qualitative Research in Sport Management, an important skillset for Sport Management researchers due to the increased frequency of this methodology in the field.

Despite the plethora of academic literature advising on academic writing for Qualitative Research, and taking into account the diversity of terminology, concepts and recommendations, several similarities can be identified, that warrant consideration by earlier career academics and higher education institutions offering academic writing courses / workshop which target the needs of all business scholars. Influenced by the more general literature and the literature in top journals of sports management, guidance for budding scholars in this field is organised

under the following headings: (1) *Identify Audience*, (2) *Persuasion and Storytelling*, (3) *Theoretical Grounding*, (4) *Reflexibility*, (5) *Cadence* and (6) *Take Risks*.

Identify Audience

Mitchell & Clark (2018, p.2) suggests that constructing the reader-writer relationship is where "*the magic really happens",* however great care must be taken when fostering this complicated relationship. Hayes & Bajzek (2008) advocate for the complexities of this relationship by proposing that the writer cannot assume what the reader does or does not know, nor can the writer determine the predisposition of the reader, thus writers should strike a balance somewhere between defining too many details and not defining enough. Misinterpreting, presuming or failure to take into account your audience can place connectivity with the reader in jeopardy, and although unintentional, can risk coming across as insulting, confusing, and even perplexing to the reader(s). Thus, Mitchell & Clark (2018) advice that effective writing anticipates the audience, it builds a relationship between the writer and reader, and can be achieved if the writer establishes early on who their audience is by identifying their concerns, backgrounds (Diversity of disciplines), and the readers receptiveness to what is being written about. One final point for consideration under this heading is thinking of your work in terms of fit with specific journals, and how the message can be altered with the purpose of making them more appealing, relevant and useful for the identified audience.

Persuasion

Fawcett *et al*. (2014) suggests business writing is "*storytelling"* and seeks to achieve three goals: (1) capture attention, (2) create understanding, and (3) persuade audience to care. Leith (2012) offers three approaches writers can use to persuade readers: *Logos,* the soundness of logic; *ethos,* through and emotional connection with the message; and *pathos,* coming to believe that the persuader has emotional authenticity and moral credibility. Persuasive writing

is dependent on the skilful incorporation of these three dimensions when seeking to write a compelling qualitative manuscript, in particular, when writing for readers not accustomed to qualitative research (Mitchell & Clark, 2018). The successful application and incorporation of techniques used to persuade others through writing, will assist in ensuring that the contributions of qualitative research are brought to a greater variety of audiences (Clark & Thompson, 2016).

Theoretical Grounding

When advising on the importance of theoretical grounding in business academic writing, Fawcett *et al*. (2014) offer five warning signs that the authors writing is meandering down a perilous path: (1) The article demonstrates sufficient reviewing of literature, but fails to be grounded in theory, (2) The author(s) have failed to synthesize any theoretical perspectives, (3) Author(s) fail to express which theoretical standpoint they are associating with, (4) Authors(s) work displays signs of dangling or disjointed theory, and (5) The Hypotheses / propositions do not emerge in a logical manner from the theory. In order to ensure the research paper does not fall victim to any of these warning signs, Fawcett *et al*. (2014) offer the following advice: (1) Ensure that theories which truly inform the research are identified early one, and ensure regular citation of key articles to ensure work is theoretically grounded, (2) Ensure thorough explanations of connections being careful to avoid reiteration of the obvious, (3) identify potential limits, and (4) derive succinct hypotheses/propositions / extensions. Furthermore, Fawcett *et al*. (2014) suggests that the theoretical grounding for qualitative research should be very concise, and address the following points: What conversation are you joining?, What theories inform this conversation?, How do these theories inform the conversation, and finally why are these theories insufficient? This process of delineating the theoretical path will assist in articulating how the author plans to contribute to both theory and practice.

Reflexivity

Jonsen *et al*. (2017) posits reflexivity as a key component for informing fundamental contributions when writing an academic paper. Reflexivity pertaining to academic writing as a cognitive process, should be structured to facilitate reflection and relatability to the readers' worlds, while remaining asymmetrical enough to attract the audience's full attention and scrutiny, with the ultimate outcome pushing the readers to self-reflect and re-examine their own taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs. When attempting to convince with reflexivity, Jonsen *et al*. (2017) suggest that academic writing should propose a writing style to the reader, and this is achieved by: (1) Connect with "normalising" rhetoric by using traditional vocabulary, (2) camouflage the (perceived) dissident nature of the approach, and (3) Legitimise your academic writing by utilising well established terms within the targeted domain that readers will find ease associating with.

Cadence

One important point for consideration when writing Qualitative papers is the lack of grammatical perfection and uniformity when using participant quotes, therefore Mitchell & Clark (2018) suggest that the appropriate use of cadence will result in the reader selectively ignoring grammatical conventions and they will slip by with little notice. Writers with strong cadence demonstrate an ability to understand when and how they can get away with breaking the "rules" of style, they expertly alternate between short and long sentences, and they understand the impact incomplete sentences can have on the rhythm of their writing, or their ability to emphasise a point. Noteworthy qualitative academic writing blends the various voices from the writer's analysis, allowing for smooth transitions between the participants voice and the researchers voice (Mitchell & Clark, 2018).

Take Risks

Kelly (2012) proposes that creativity in academic writing provides structure to the writer's ideas using both originality and innovation as defined by the social context in which they are situated. Mitchell & Clark (2018) suggest that when executing academic writing, the writer should afford themselves permission to resist others, and their own, reservations, however this requires reflexivity and reading widely. One approach suggested is looking at your research with a new lens, this might involve methodological creativity, combining of diverse ideas to construct the foundation of a whole new concept, or from a writing perspective in particular, borrow a writing style from a different discipline (Mitchell & Clark, 2018). Academic writing is difficult process, and an easy approach of one word at a time is the most suitable approach to adopt, all the while allowing reflections to permeate, experimenting, and embracing failure, before attempting it all again.

Although this essay does not provide the reader with failproof guidelines for qualitative academic writing in sport management and business domains more generally, it does seek to provide the reader with "food for thought" for prior to, and during their academic writing process. Some points seek to emphasise the importance of generic and conventional schools of thought and practice, while others might recommend a slight deviation from the fundamental principles of qualitative academic writing in sport management and business. It is hoped that this piece will challenge early career academics to consider qualitative research within the sport management discipline, as well as offer them some guidance for writing a suitable academic paper.

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