

# The ‘training wheels’ of academic essay writing: Considered, coordinated and collaborative use of writing models for commencing HE students

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Given the significant increase in non-traditional students and changing pathways into higher education (HE), the need to scaffold academic literacies development for commencing students has never been greater. Writing models are recognised as useful in this process, particularly in relation to academic essay writing. However, there are reservations and concerns with the use of writing models in teaching and learning in HE. These include that models can oversimplify the writing process, inhibit development of writer identity, limit creativity and expression, and lead to an impression that writing conventions and structures are fixed and unchanging (Macbeth, 2010). A further concern is the perceived impact of writing models on assessment processes, including issues of plagiarism and imitation. These various concerns lead to resistance to more extensive use of writing models in HE curricula, or their use only in limited ways. This paper argues for a more considered and coordinated use of writing models, involving closer collaboration between discipline teachers and Academic Language and Learning (ALL) educators. It advocates for student imitation of writing models to be accepted as a legitimate and necessary stage in some students’ formative development as academic writers, and recommends making the purpose and intended uses of writing models clearer to all, including both students and academic staff. The paper uses the analogy of ‘training wheels’ on a bicycle to explore some of these themes, including why writing models may be valuable, their limitations, and their likely longer term impact on commencing HE students’ development as academic essay writers.

**Key Words:** commencing students, writing models, academic literacies acquisition, academic essay writers.

## 1. Introduction

Not everyone who learns to ride a bike does so using training wheels. However, training wheels perform a useful function in helping *some* people to manage the initial hurdle of developing balance and acquiring enough skills and confidence to get started as cyclists. Those who do learn this way ultimately remove the wheels, because they cannot ride very fast or very effectively with training wheels on – the increase in stability comes at the cost of manoeuvrability and speed. As far as we know, in the long term people’s proficiency as cyclists is not influenced by whether they started out with training wheels or not. However, without the use of training wheels to help them over the initial hurdles, some may never have become cyclists at all.

This paper looks at another device frequently used to help people get started with a new and unfamiliar skill – the skill of academic essay writing. Like training wheels, the degree to which

learners need writing models, and the extent to which they come to rely on them, varies considerably from individual to individual.

Writing models can take many forms, ranging from a complete essay, as an exemplar of what performance at a particular level looks like or annotated to show strengths and areas for improvement, to short paragraphs illustrating the format, language and/or content required within a specific part of the text. The term exemplar typically refers to a positive model providing an example of a text which successfully and skilfully meets key assessment criteria and can be held up as a quality response. In this paper the terms 'exemplar' and 'writing model' are used to some extent inter-changeably, and are considered as different points along the same continuum. Decisions on the types of writing models to provide students are influenced by a range of factors, including genre familiarity, students' stages of development as academic writers, the assignment guidelines, primary assessment goals for the assignment, the learning focus of the unit of study and the longer term learning and assessment requirements of the course. Several writers (Sadler, 2010; Handley & Williams, 2011; Wilson & Devereux, 2014) have noted the learning value in providing students with multiple models of writing at a range of levels reflecting both effective and less effective performance. Others have noted the value of writing exemplars not only in providing information to students on the product of their writing, but in providing a context for discussion on the writing *process* as part of formative learning (Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 2002; Handley & Williams, 2011).

Traditionally there has been a tendency to expect students to acquire and develop competence in discipline-specific academic writing organically, through a kind of osmosis (Elton, 2010). However there is now much greater awareness of the complexities of this process, and acknowledgement that commencing students' first experiences as academic essay writers significantly influence their transition into the HE learning environment (Zepke, 2013; Wilson et al., 2014). Their early writing experiences can set them off on either a positive or negative trajectory in terms of their first year experience. Krause (2001) has suggested that commencing students' first written assignments present ideal opportunities "...to make a difference in students' early educational experiences with a view to proactively integrating them into the academic context" (p.150). However for a significant number of students their first written assignments have the opposite effect, causing anxiety, confusion about how to function effectively within the academic environment and doubt about their ability to cope and succeed. According to Krause (2001) the transition process to HE learning involves developing a clearer understanding about the academic expectations and standards required, and this is not necessarily easy or obvious for commencing students. A significant finding of her study into early assignment writing experiences was that students particularly valued the provision of writing models or samples of past assignments as a form of support, as they gave an indication of what was expected and what standard was required in their assignment writing. Clearly provision of this kind of support could make up one small piece of the puzzle of the optimal First Year Experience advocated by Kift, Nelson, and Clarke (2010), "...framed around intentional first year curriculum design that carefully scaffolds, mediates and supports first year learning" (p. 11).

This paper draws on a range of the relevant learning and assessment literature related to the HE context. Some observations on ways in which models are used, and on changes in the HE teaching and learning environment, reflect the author's own experience as an ALL educator at several institutions, with a range of undergraduate courses in the medical, health, and biomedical sciences domains.

## 2. Changing HE teaching and learning environment

The HE teaching and learning environment is in a time of significant change. Larger class sizes and less favourable staff to student ratios (Coates & Ransom, 2011), broader access for non-traditional students (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), and changing pathways into HE have all had an impact. According to Gibbs (2006), within HE generally "there is less academic time available per student and intense pressure on academics to increase research productivity" (p.11). Other factors influencing the teaching and learning environment include changing literacy and numeracy practices within society, increased use of digital technologies and e-

learning, and greater reliance on sessional rather than on-going academic teaching staff to deliver courses.

These myriad factors translate into both a growing expectation that students will act as autonomous learners (Williamson & Goldsmith, 2013), and more limited opportunities for meaningful interaction between students and discipline academics. Although some forms of online learning are interactive, the trend toward more blended/online delivery may be further exacerbating these developments, particularly when combined with often falling attendance rates for on-campus learning activities. More flexible and varied forms of delivery are becoming the norm, and whilst to an extent driven by student preference (Artino Jr, 2010; Paechter & Maier, 2010), there are implications in terms of the student experience in general and how well the HE learning environment accommodates particular categories of learners.

In short, despite a student cohort that more than ever requires explicit scaffolding to support their acquisition of academic literacies, the resources to effectively provide this are diminishing. This climate increases the need to make effective use of approaches that can facilitate independent learning, as well as contribute to the effectiveness of assessment tasks as learning opportunities. Effectively, the scaffolding of academic literacies acquisition and development is moving from an optional ‘best practice’ activity to a fundamental imperative in addressing both student need and institutional retention and success agendas. The associated pressure for discipline teachers to address retention and success issues within courses sometimes translates into a greater willingness to explore opportunities for designed-in scaffolding (Wilson & Deveureux, 2014) within curricula, and this may include increased openness to exploring the use of writing models to support commencing students in their academic essay writing. So the changing HE environment may be opening a window of opportunity for greater collaboration between ALL educators and discipline lecturers in meeting both institutional and learner needs.

### **3. Taking writing models for granted**

Macbeth (2010) notes that models are “ubiquitous in the ordinary, practical world” (p. 33) and perhaps for that reason their use in the teaching of writing has not attracted much explicit attention – they are taken for granted to some extent. Over ten years ago Orsmond et al. (2002) noted a lack of literature on the role of exemplars as models in HE teaching and learning and their influence on student understanding of assessments, and this remains an under-researched area.

Undoubtedly writing models are widely used within ALL practice and in courses designed to support students as academic writers. However, there are often issues with the ‘ad hoc’ nature in which they are used, and with the degree to which they are contextualised to reflect specific discipline and assessment requirements. There is also sometimes a lack of shared understanding of how they are intended to be used. This paper advocates a much more considered and coordinated approach to their use, reflecting much closer collaboration between ALL educators and discipline academics.

Carroll (2009) has argued that for learning to occur students need to transform, use or apply information rather than simply reproduce it. While agreeing with Carroll in principle in terms of long term learning, it is suggested that in the early stages of development of students as academic essay writers there may be a legitimate place for the reproduction and imitation of models as part of their formative learning. However, if choosing to give students writing models to aid their development as writers, we also need to give them ‘permission’ to use them, as well as the capacity to use them effectively as learning resources.

It is important to make clear that all writers, from novice to expert, utilise writing models, particularly when writing within new or less familiar genres. This is the case whether writing a short letter to the council or a doctoral thesis. Writing models assist writers at any level not only in terms of form and structure, but also in developing aspects such as style, tone and expression. However, the focus of this paper is on the particular transitional, largely discipline-specific writing models provided to commencing HE students as a stage in their development as academic essay writers.

#### 4. Limited use of writing models in HE teaching

For many ALL practitioners, provision of writing models to support student writing development is second nature, and their value in learning seems obvious. So it is useful to explore why writing models and exemplars are not more extensively used in HE teaching and learning. This is the case even at a university where their use has been mandated to make standards and expectations explicit to students, as it has at the Western Sydney University<sup>1</sup> (Gill, 2015). Reporting on implementation of an institution-wide assessment strategy at WSU involving an audit of assessment practices, Gill (2015) noted that:

...lack of clarity [around assessments] was compounded by the absence of exemplars demonstrating standards and expectations to students. Exemplars were uncommon across the courses reviewed despite student feedback consistently communicating a desire for them and the UWS Assessment Policy strongly advocating their use. (p. 7)

In the WSU context, Gill attributed failure to provide exemplars primarily to discipline academics lacking the time and skills to take on the task of developing these learning resources. Another factor sometimes dictating against development of such learning resources by discipline teachers is a lack of clarity around what the expected standards and expectations for an assignment actually are. Development of exemplars and models necessarily involves a level of agreement and consensus on what is acceptable that is not always evident in the HE teaching and learning environment. This observation highlights a further potential value in their development – the opportunity for teaching teams to engage in discussion to *achieve* greater clarity and shared understanding of expectations around assessment tasks.

Alongside practical constraints limiting the development of assignment-specific exemplars and writing models, there is also conscious resistance to their use. At HE level, this resistance is sometimes due to concerns about how they will affect assessment processes, including concerns about copying, imitation, and impact on the capacity to objectively evaluate student performance and content understanding. At least some of these concerns would appear to relate to conceptions of the purpose of assessment itself, and whether it should be primarily focused on measurement or learning. Much of the more recent literature on assessment in HE is based on a view that some traditional assessment approaches impede rather than facilitate learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2007), or at best do not promote meaningful learning. The suggestion is that traditional assessment design and administration is often not focussed on creating formative learning opportunities, but rather on attempting to measure performance in objective ways. This has led to a growing movement for assessment at HE level to be reframed and re-imagined; for it to be at least as much about learning as it is about measurement. Of relevance is Boud's concept of sustainable assessment (Carless, Salter, Yang, & Lam, 2011), defined as “practices which meet immediate assessment needs whilst not compromising the knowledge, skills and dispositions required to support lifelong learning activities” (p. 397). From this perspective resistance to use of writing models as incompatible with assessment aims and practices would be cause for the assessment process itself, and its link to learning, to come under scrutiny. Joughin (2009) for example calls for a rethink of assessment approaches to better balance their learning and judging functions.

However, in a review of past literature on writing models Macbeth (2010) notes many other concerns. Some of these include that models “... inhibit students' identities, misrepresent the processes of writing, and do not easily transfer to other writing tasks” (p. 35). Others are that models provide simplistic representations of genres and styles, and thus tend to limit expression. Macbeth also notes concerns that writing models represent writing conventions and styles as fixed and unchanging rather than dynamic.

While the concerns identified by Macbeth (2010) are real, she argues that they need not lead to a conclusion that writing models are not of pedagogical value, particularly when the use of such models is viewed as a stage in learning. She argues that one of their key values lies in making

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the *University of Western Sydney* rebadged itself as *Western Sydney University* in 2015.

the invisible visible; Wilson and Devereux (2014) make a similar point in advocating for ALL and discipline lecturers to work together to help students realise "...the literacy practices valued in their disciplines" (p.A-97). A significant point of Macbeth's is that it is precisely because writing models present incomplete approximations of writing within a discipline that they offer accessible opportunities for learning, as briefly discussed further below.

## 5. Effective use of writing models

As already noted, provision of exemplars to students in first year units of study is mandated in assessment policy and teaching and learning strategies at the University of Western Sydney, as part of a scaffolded approach to academic literacies acquisition (Gill, 2015). So at one university at least this practice has been formalised. Also noted is the value of contextualised, assignment-specific and discipline-specific exemplars and writing models not only in guiding students on the expected product for their early written assessments, but in facilitating discussion on the writing process (Orsmond et al., 2002; Sadler, 2010; Handley & Williams, 2011). It is therefore important to consider how development and use of these learning resources can best be achieved, and what conditions are necessary for them to be developed and used in meaningful and effective ways.

### 5.1 Considered and coordinated

Within the assessment literature there is recognition that providing writing models and exemplars, while a valuable step, is only part of the puzzle in adequately supporting students to become academic essay writers. Writing models and exemplars can provide a basis for further teaching and learning. However, according to Joughin (2009) there are no guarantees that students will necessarily identify and engage with learning opportunities in the ways their lecturers expect. This can be due to students adopting a strategic approach to task completion, but can also be due to a lack of clarity around learning and assessment tasks. Haggis (cited in Elton, 2010) makes the point that the underlying principles expected to be addressed and followed in academic writing tasks tend to be implicit in task instructions and teacher assumptions about expected content and structure. They are rarely explicitly outlined, and as a consequence are often invisible or unclear to those lacking familiarity with the discipline discourse. Due to the sometimes contested nature of these underlying principles and lack of agreement on how they are best exemplified and expressed within the discipline discourse, Haggis contends that task-specific explanations of requirements and expectations greatly assist students.

Hunter and Tse (2013) note that even the provision of detailed marking criteria for written assignments, while of value in helping students understand expectations, cannot be assumed to give students either the awareness or skills to produce writing which effectively meets those criteria. For this reason they argue that the desired language within the discipline context needs to be "explicitly explicated, modelled and discussed" (p. 228). Similarly, when assignment-specific writing models and exemplars are provided to students assumptions are often made about how they will be utilised and what benefits they offer in terms of learning. Explicit guidance on their use is rarely given, and their place in the learning-assessment continuum generally not made clear. In fact the extent to which imitation of the model/exemplar is expected, encouraged and/or acceptable is often unclear not only to students but to the teaching team also, with students sometimes receiving conflicting advice on what is or is not acceptable.

One way of making intended uses of exemplars and writing models clearer would be to incorporate their use into assignment marking criteria, under the category of 'structure and organisation' for example. Consistency or inconsistency with the writing models could be noted within criteria, thus 'giving permission' to students to imitate the desirable features explicated in the models. Such an approach would not preclude rewarding students with higher marks where their writing went beyond the writing models provided in effective and appropriate ways. Consistent with the above, Handley and Williams (2011) discuss the importance of making clear to students how the provision of exemplars is intended to aid their learning; they advocate making the intended uses of exemplars *explicit* rather than assuming a shared understanding or capacity to

apply inductive reasoning. This was an issue in a study they conducted into exemplar use by students:

We had expected students to read the exemplars and the feedback, reflect on what they had read, and post queries onto the forum allowing module leaders to clarify misunderstandings. This step in the learning process did not happen. (p.103)

Handley and Williams (2011, building on Sadler, 1987) also advocate making criteria and standards more *visible* to students, suggesting that careful selection and re-construction of exemplars, as well as creating opportunities for dialogue about those exemplars, can aid in this process. Sadler (2010) has argued that in order to make judgements about quality in writing students need “planned rather than random exposure to exemplars” and ideally opportunities to “engage in evaluative conversations” with teachers and peers (p. 544).

Similarly, Macbeth (2010) notes the importance for learning of students understanding what writing models represent, and where their limitations lie. Most often, she suggests, they provide information on basic principles, while providing only a limited or sparse or incomplete version of the text as a whole. For this reason, “discovering the insufficiencies of the model” (p. 33) is an important aspect of how the model can be used by the student; it not only provides information about what to include and how to shape that, but also about areas where further elaboration, the setting of topic parameters, and further topic development may be required or desirable (Macbeth, 2010). Along similar lines, Handley and Williams (2011) argue that it is precisely because models can be controlled for complexity that they are of particular benefit for new academic writers at the formative stage of their learning. They provide the opportunity to present students with accessible ‘approximations’ of the genres and text structures which they may be expected to adopt in producing an assignment response. Handley and Williams (2011) concluded that:

‘real’ assignments may not be the best exemplars because of their inherent complexity; ...*constructed* exemplars may be more effective in making assessment qualities visible;...*constructed excerpts* may be appropriate when students are learning to ‘see’ criteria for the first time. (p. 105)

So while an exemplar may be a fully developed response to an assignment, meeting key criteria like word count and full reference list, it can also be an edited version of such a document, providing examples only in a ‘cut down’ format. As noted, provision of both positive and negative examples of performance can also be of value, particularly in providing a basis for dialogue on quality with the students.

Handley and Williams (2011) also note the value of exemplars in promoting consistency between markers where large teaching teams are involved, and in fact, as suggested in one student response in their study, the exemplar can provide a common reference point for all stakeholders involved in the assessment process. Consistency in marking is facilitated by a shared understanding, and this may be achieved through discussion between markers based on appropriately constructed exemplars.

As outlined earlier, one reservation with use of writing models is that they can create an impression that writing practices and conventions are fixed and unchanging. For this reason it is important that writing models, as with most other learning resources, are regularly reviewed and updated. It is also often preferable that they are offered to students as examples or options, rather than as templates not subject to interpretation and negotiation. In this way writing models can *reflect* current practices and understandings within disciplines and discipline-based discourse, rather than determining or constraining them. Again, it is important to acknowledge that the focus of this paper is on commencing students and those in early formative stages of their development as academic writers. As writers become more sophisticated their reliance on models should lessen, and their ability to transcend the models grow.

Early attempts at discipline-specific academic writing, including where writing models are provided and to an extent imitated, may sometimes exhibit overly formulaic structures and methods of expression. However, just as the training wheels on a bike are never intended as a permanent

solution to the problem of staying upright, so an early attempt at an academic essay need not be viewed as anything other than part of the process of transition to becoming a competent and independent academic writer. In both cases the scaffolding is quite intentionally provided to help the learner through a *transition or formative phase* in becoming competent. In building construction scaffolding is used in the early stages – it is removed once a building is able to remain standing independently. To my knowledge it has not been suggested that use of scaffolding in the early construction stages will have other than a positive impact on the longer term viability of a structure, and it is common practice to dismantle the scaffolding once the structure starts to take shape. Despite being essential to the building process in the initial stages, at some point the scaffolding starts to get in the way, or simply becomes redundant. So it is with transitional writing models, which should gradually be removed as students become more competent and capable.

## 5.2 Collaborative

Hunter and Tse (2013) note a tendency within universities for the learning of academic literacies to be viewed as the domain of the ‘writing specialist’ rather than discipline lecturer. Space is often made within programs for these ‘specialists’ to come in to address (often in discrete foundation units) the academic literacies development of students. Hunter and Tse (2013) refer to this as a ‘partly integrated approach’ which “...moves responsibility for inducting students into academic writing...to ‘agents’ outside the discipline” (p. 228). This compartmentalisation of roles can extend to the curriculum, with limited opportunities for collaboration on development of writing models and other learning resources.

In fact, Elton (2010) suggests that genuine collaboration between writing specialists and discipline specialists in the interests of student learning is relatively uncommon. Where this does occur it is often a product of effective working relationships having developed organically over time, and as such is dependent on interpersonal rather than systemic factors. Despite this, Elton (2010) contends that “neither specialists in academic writing nor practising academics in a discipline can, independently of each other, provide students with the necessary help to develop the ability to write in their academic discipline” (p. 151). While this may slightly overstate the necessity of collaboration, there seems little doubt that students benefit from effective collaboration between these two areas. Furthermore, collaboration in the development of writing models and other learning resources is highly desirable in order to produce texts which reflect in an integrated way the features of effective writing within a discipline. In discussing teaching and learning issues at WSU, Gill (2015) concluded that significant cultural change may be required within HE to reach a point where there is greater acceptance of a genuinely collaborative whole-of-course-approach in which “...collaborative planning [and by extension collaborative teaching and learning, becomes] normal business” (p. 9).

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that provision of ‘training wheels’ for students as academic essay writers, in the form of transitional, discipline-specific writing models, is increasingly necessary given the changing HE environment. It has suggested that this needs to be done not in the ‘ad hoc’ way that it has tended to be in the past, but in a considered and coordinated manner involving collaboration between ALL educators and discipline lecturers. Various changes in the HE learning environment, not least the increase in non-traditional students and changing pathways into universities, is taking this from simply good practice to a necessary stage in the development of some students as academic essay writers. It has also been suggested that the current HE climate, including a growing emphasis on student retention and success, may be creating new opportunities for such collaboration. All stakeholders, including students, discipline lecturers, and ALL educators, can benefit from greater clarity on the intended uses of writing models for learning. Processes need to be developed which recognise the value of these particular writing models in formative learning, and give students both ‘permission’ to explicitly use them and guidance on how to do this effectively. Also important is the realisation that use of these writing models by commencing students is a stage in their learning, and that both the requirement to provide this

scaffolding and the need to use it will diminish over time as students develop as academic essay writers.

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