# RESEARCH, WRITING, AND CREATIVE PROCESS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION: TALES FROM THE FIELD

# Edited by Dianne Conrad



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# 8. Creative Academic Writing and Anatomy of a Scholarly Paper

Aras Bozkurt

Academia is full of people who have a lot to say but write very little, and people who have little to say but write a lot; the best amongst us are those who achieve the most appropriate balance between the two.

Petar Jandrić

Creative academic writing is a process and every final product is a scholarly art. This chapter consists of two sections. The first section introduces several creative approaches to better shape a scholarly paper and explains how authors can adopt innovative strategies. Assuming that expertise comes from mastering the structure of a scholarly paper, the second section explores the anatomy of a scholarly paper and provides some practical tips that can aid in writing well-structured papers.

The purpose of research is to solve a mystery, find an answer, and share this knowledge with other individuals all over the world. Sharing has many forms, and the most essential one in the scholarly landscape is writing about the research in question. In addition to writing for the purpose of sharing, writing is an act of documenting research and making it accessible and tangible.

# Why I Research and Write: Curiosity and the Need to Learn

The palest ink is stronger than the sharpest memory.

Anonymous

Why do I write scholarly pieces? That question seems very basic but my answer to that question is deeper and more sophisticated. In addition to reporting and documenting my research, I write to document my exploration and learning journey. In this process, everything starts with curiosity — my curiosity drives my inquiry, my inquiry meets my learning needs and expands my worldview. It is certain that scholarly writing (e.g., articles, conference papers, books, book chapters) has many purposes such as advancing the field, exploring a phenomenon, getting a broader understanding of the research in question, reporting empirical findings, or, perhaps, meeting the expectations of the scholarly community. I, as an editor, author, and researcher, pursue similar goals, but one of the reasons that I write is to nurture my curiosity and meet my learning needs.

Verba volant, scripta manent [spoken words fly away, written words remain]. Anonymous

Before I begin to write, I sharpen my thoughts, develop a clearer vision of the topic, and build a cognitive map as I force myself to read more deeply on the topic. I, therefore, sometimes write about the topics that I want to explore and become a nomad traversing bits of information, cross-pollinating between diverse views, ideas, and discussions. In the end, above all, I write to nurture my thoughts and enhance and enrich my cognitive inner world. When I write, I know that the output is more than a scholarly paper and a contribution to the related literature; it is part of my identity, the way I express and reflect my ideas. My writing, therefore, is important to me; and I must be sure about the final product because these scholarly writings are my intellectual fingerprints that are unique to me. Finally, writing is a form of sharing, and sharing what you know or think about is a form of caring for the world we live in, the societies we interact with, and the individuals we communicate with.

In this chapter, I am going to share some of my discoveries and insights regarding academic writing. These insights — and the advice

that accompany them — have developed over many years and have served me, personally, well.

Each section below attends as fully as permitted by chapter length to the various aspects of academic writing. Each section is prefaced by a quote that I think cogently captures its essence.

## Reading Before Writing

Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.

Joseph Addison

One of the most critical steps in writing a scholarly paper is reading. Writing articles requires prior research, which necessitates further reading even if you have expertise on the topic. Thus, you should read, read, and then read again before you start writing. We have to read what others have written to learn and gain deeper insight into how they approached the topic, what are the limitations and strengths; and most importantly, if they exist, what are the gaps in related literature. Besides, meaningful deep reading will also allow you to gain more expertise on the topic, and your expertise will increase even more when you write on the same topic.

Reading, in some cases, can be painful. You will most likely download hundreds of articles and store them in a folder. In some cases, authors blindly download everything, but you should be selective as the pile can become a heavy weight and reading a heavy weight of material can be quite boring. Organize your downloads (i.e., by publication year and author surname) and create a blank page where you can take notes as you read. At this point, remember that you do not need to read every single detail; you can skim through the articles so that you can do a more detailed reading after identifying key resources. If you create a bibliography using this process, you will ease your pain when you must give a report of your reading.

Before starting writing, you should also consider your audience and remember that writing is a way of communicating with them. Therefore, you must digest what you read, organize your ideas, outline a structure that ensures a seamless, smooth flow and a rich reading experience, and most importantly, make sure that your audience will be able to connect the dots when they read your entire paper.

# Writing Through and Editing

The process of editing is what I enjoy most — putting the pieces together and making sense out of them.

Christian Marclay

Do not strive for perfection. Just write as the inspiration comes and when you come up with an innovative idea, just write it down. These ideas come all of a sudden and likewise fly away all of a sudden. Personally, I do not worry about grammar and right word choices. I believe that function — delivering a message — comes first; and then form, following structural and stylistic issues, comes second. So, it is of utmost importance to sketch what you are thinking and then you can polish it later.

We are the products of editing, rather than of authorship.

George Wald

When you have a draft paper with the main arguments, you can start editing your paper. At this point, remember that as we dive in deeper while reading and exploring, we can experience *scholarly blindness*, which means that dots are connected in our cognitive world but we might have failed to connect them on paper. As we work on a paper, our brains can trick us into connecting these dots automatically. Therefore, it is a good strategy to leave the paper for a while and reset our shortterm memory so that our brains have a fresh beginning and we can identify unconnected dots on our paper. That is, if you put your work on hold and allow it to lie fallow, the resulting product will be an improvement.

The first draft reveals the art; revision reveals the artist.

Michael Lee

Editing can address grammar, word choice, and structural and organizational issues. Printing and reading your paper, reading it aloud, and having someone who is not familiar with the topic read it are other effective strategies. After editing your paper, ask an academic buddy to read your paper and give feedback and constructive criticism from an external perspective. Allowing someone else to critically review your paper is a good strategy to make it better. However, do not forget that there is no perfect final paper, but you can demonstrate perfect effort.

## Planting Intellectual Seeds

We connect the dots in the drawing with our mind. We give them a meaning, a figurative sense, which is self-reflexive in that it creates us, because we are the experiencer of the moment.

Frederick Lenz

Writing a scholarly piece is not a simple act, but rather, it is a form of planting intellectual seeds that will eventually grow and blossom in someone else's inner cognitive world. This notion implies that you should be careful about what you write and how you approach the way in which you report your thoughts or your findings. In this regard, we can assume that your paper will report many dots and that you aspire to the level of understanding may vary according to your purpose. You can write to inform people, give them a critical understanding, help them to explore a phenomenon, and help them to gain deeper insight or wisdom. It is, therefore, important to decide how your intellectual seeds will grow and when they turn into something green, how they will contribute to someone else's worldview.

## Scholarly Papers Form an Intellectual Network

We can only connect the dots we collect, which makes everything you write about you. Your connections are the thread that you weave into the cloth that becomes the story that only you can tell.

Amanda Palmer

In many cases, people assume that academic papers are documents reporting research or arguing a new idea. Beyond their textual nature, they form an invisible intellectual work as they connect different ideas or papers in the scholarly landscape. In addition to creating a form of art by selecting words and expressions purposefully, citations and references create a network that is identifiable through some visualization techniques.

You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So, you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future.

Steve Jobs

Words, terms, or expressions, for instance, can create a discourse network based on their co-occurrences. Aras Bozkurt and Olaf Zawacki-Richter's (2021) study proposes a visual synthesis of scholarly publications in the intellectual landscape (Figure 1). The authors analyzed the titles and abstracts of 1,362 articles published between 2014 and 2019 and visualized them through text mining. Their analyses proposed a network-based concept map in the field of distance education.

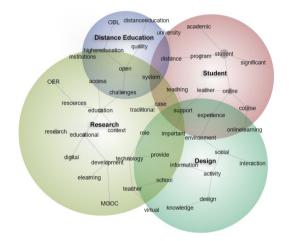


Fig. 1. A concept map showing the research patterns in distance education studies (Bozkurt & Zawacki-Richter, 2021).

A current and relevant example of connectivity within the field is Bozkurt, Kadir Karakaya, Murat Turk, Özlem Karakaya and Daniela Castellanos-Reyes' (2022) study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In their study, the authors created a network graph depicting the citing and being-cited patterns in COVID-19 and education-related peer-reviewed publications (Figure 2).

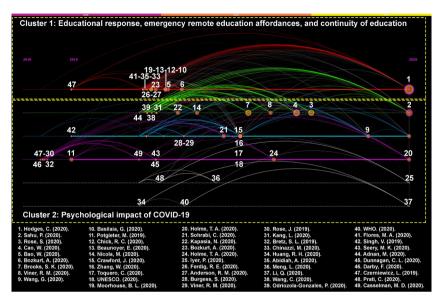


Fig. 2. A network graph showing citing and being cited patterns in COVID-19 and education papers (Bozkurt et al., 2022).

Everything's intentional. It's just filling in the dots.

#### David Byrne

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The above examples and figures are good proof that every word, expression, citation, and reference should be selected purposefully since they form an intellectual network. This view also gives more responsibility to authors because writing a scholarly paper is a form of reporting a research process or documenting innovative ideas systematically and more critically and purposefully. The above visual proofs from selected articles imply that writing a scholarly paper is not a random act, yet a purposeful one that forms, shapes, and informs an intellectual work.

# Mystery Unlocked: Metaphors, Easter Eggs, and Hidden Messages

The metaphor is probably the most fertile power possessed by man. José Ortega y Gasset

We can forge our arguments in different ways such as using metaphors, placing Easter eggs, or leaving hidden messages. In some cases, such an approach can be confusing and risky for writing a scholarly paper, but it is still a creative way to make your papers more engaging and mysterious to arouse some curiosity. To make this point, two editorial papers will be given as examples. The first one, entitled "In pursuit of the right mix: Blended learning for augmenting, enhancing, and enriching flexibility" by Bozkurt and Sharma (2021), is about combining on-site and online learning by blending the strengths of one modality and neutralizing the weaknesses of the other to provide flexibility. In this editorial, the section entitled "Blending to Achieve the Right Mix!" has metaphors from the movie *The Matrix* that imply the importance of choosing the right modality using the red and blue pills; and another metaphor from the book Alice in Wonderland to imply the importance of deciding "on the use of sequential or parallel designs, as well as consider[ing] the factors of time, space, path, and pace to adopt an ideal blended learning model" (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2021, p. 2).

Onsite and online learning is not a choice of red or blue pills (The Wachowskis, 1999), nor is the purpose of blending to create an ecstasy for synthetic stimulant and hallucinogenic effects. In fact, the goal is to chase the white rabbit (Carroll, 1865) to blend and get the right mix.

Developing these metaphors, the authors placed a white rabbit on the left corner of the first page and two pills in red and blue at the end of the paper. In the acknowledgement section, there is another reference to Grace Slick, who wrote the song "White Rabbit." The acknowledgement section also thanks Lewis Carroll and his character Alice for inspiring many of us and introducing Wonderland and the White Rabbit. Yet, only very careful and curious eyes can see the second part of the acknowledgement as it is written in white and not visible in regular reading. Another example is also from Bozkurt and Sharma (2022) who wrote the editorial "Digital Transformation and the Way We (Mis)Interpret Technology." In this article, the authors pay tribute to the father of science fiction, Jules Verne, in visible form, and also give thanks to the fictional character Optimus Prime from the movie *Transformers*, which is written in white letters and not seen if you do not read the paper to discover such hidden messages. Because the editorial is about the digital transformation process, there is a pale image at the end of the paper depicting the transformation process of a caterpillar into a butterfly.

These examples are given not to imply that all papers should include metaphors, Easter eggs, or hidden messages, but these examples show that the authors perceive their editorials as pieces of art and use such tricks and design elements to convey their messages in different forms, and perhaps, in more powerful ways. However, it should also be noted that before crafting scholarly papers as in the above examples, those who are in their early academic career or who are MA or PhD students should master the anatomy of a scholarly paper first. The next section will address this issue.

#### Anatomy of a Scholarly Paper

In essence, most nonfiction papers fall into two categories: research papers and topic papers (Straus, 2012). While research papers are more organized and follow a certain structure as they adopt a methodology, topic papers can reflect a free, but coherent, concise, and scholarly tone. In any categories, authors are expected to provide a clear message, create a logical framework, demonstrate confidence by backing up the arguments by citing the related literature, engage readers' emotions, and avoid formal, impersonal language (Gevin, 2018). Addressing a wider audience and being clear in the way we report our findings so that readers can understand our arguments is important for scientific communication (Fozdar, 2022; Warren et al., 2021) and even for being cited more frequently. In its essence, a good paper is written for a purpose (Perneger & Hudelson, 2004) and shaped around research in question.

Publishing scholarly papers can be a challenge for many authors, even for experienced ones (Hartshorne et al., 2021). Therefore, paying attention to details before submitting your paper (see Dennen & Lim, 2021; Hodges & Curry, 2021; Johnson et al., 2021; Moore & Dickson-Deane, 2021) will also seal the fate of your paper (Naidu, 2021). In this sense, the following section explores the anatomy of a paper and explains the points to pay attention to while writing a scholarly paper.

#### Title, Abstract, and Keywords

This section is a micro-representation of the paper and can be considered independently since most databases will present these sections firsthand. Please also note that if 1,000 people access your paper, 1,000 people will read your title, 500 will read the abstract, 250 will read the keywords, and approximately 100 of them will read the entire paper. Thus, it is of utmost importance to forge these sections carefully.

#### Title

Make sure that your title reflects the scope and nature of your study. It should be relevant, informative, and able to arouse curiosity. Refrain from using clichés in the title because clichéd titles might shadow the true potential of your paper. Use a maximum of twelve to sixteen words in the title; considering that most of the publications will appear online, please also consider the perspective of search engine optimization and use a title that is easy to find and visible in online spaces. The title should not include technical jargon so that it will reach a broader audience. In many cases, the title, along with the abstract and keywords, is the showcase of your paper. Therefore, select words or phrases that help the reader to understand the purpose and scope of the study. Note that the title is the very essence of your study and serves as the signature of the author. The title gives the first impression, and most readers will decide whether they should read the paper after reading the title.

#### Abstract

The abstract gives readers a preview and informs them what comes next. The abstract should be one single paragraph and have a structured format. It should include an introductory sentence and should also address the aim, method and significant findings and takeaways, and conclusion of the study. Remember that, in addition to the title, some readers engage with the abstract and then decide whether to read the whole study. Do not use in-text citations in the abstract since the abstract appears as a separate section in many academic databases. An abstract should be approximately 250 words, which means that you must craft it carefully so that it properly informs the readers and gives your work the value it deserves.

#### Keywords

Your keywords identify how, where, and when your study is seen in online spaces. Your keywords should be representative and distinctive. To identify the appropriate keywords, ask yourself the following: "Which keywords should I use to find such a paper on the internet?" Keywords are also used by editors to assign reviewers, which implies that you should pay careful attention to the choice of keywords. By default, many publications require a total of five keywords which limit their number and further necessitates selecting them meticulously. You should refrain from using keywords that are too generic or non-specific.

#### Introduction, Literature Review, and Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

The purpose of the introduction is to provide a background, to offer a description of what the paper is about, and to warm up readers. Metaphorically, the introduction serves like a trailer for a movie. In this section, you can introduce the scope, context, background, core studies, basic terms, and definitions. After providing the background and informing readers of the structure of the study, you can also write about the main purpose of the study. An introduction is also vital in terms of hooking the reader. Therefore, the introduction should be concise and engaging. Strategically, after providing the background, authors are expected to narrow their arguments and then present the purpose of the study.

While writing the literature review section, be focused, selective, and goal-oriented. Rather than creating confusion on your research topic, provide a summary, synthesis, and critical evaluation of the topic. Carefully select studies that contribute to the conceptualization and understanding of your study, provide a logical flow and connect the studies to each other, reveal research gaps and position your paper, report conflicting and supporting literature, and finally locate your arguments based on the intellectual space you created when you formulated your literature review section.

If applicable, you can provide a theoretical or conceptual framework. Using such a framework helps you contribute to a broader understanding of the topic, build on an existing body of research, navigate among different assumptions, and provide researchers a basis for further study. When you use a theoretical or conceptual framework, you also need to explain how it relates to your research topic and report what your assumptions are. The most significant point is to bring this framework into the discussion section and interpret your findings through that lens.

#### Methodology

If you torture the data long enough, it [sic] will confess to anything. Ronald Case

This section explains how you conducted your study, which methodological paradigm you adopted, and how it contributed to the exploration and explanation of the research in question. This section should be clear and concise in providing adequate details that may be needed to adopt or replicate the study. This section reports the procedures that inform how the research was conducted and the data collected and analyzed. It is, therefore, crucial to provide a rationale and justification for the methodological paradigm adopted.

It is usually helpful if the authors clearly state and articulate the methodology (qualitative, quantitative, mixed, or other emerging research method) and research model or design (e.g., survey, case study, phenomenology, experimental study, explanatory sequential mixed design) at the beginning of the methodology section. Always include sub-sections such as research sampling or research group, data collection tools, data analysis procedures, reliability and validity issues, ethical issues, and limitations of the study. Please note that the methodology section should function like a flawless machine in which each working

part meaningfully contributes to the overall methodological process, because unreliable methodology undermines the overall research process as well as your findings, discussion, and conclusion.

Because methodology acts as a pillar of your research, a flaw in methodological design can quickly undermine the overall research. It is, therefore, of utmost importance to double-check your methodological procedure before conducting your research. Please also note that the design, and flow of the methodological section is already identified when the aim of the study was defined.

#### Findings and Discussion

Report your findings systematically and in the same order if you have more than one research aim or question. To report your findings, use figures and tables. To avoid repetition, do not provide the same data in the text that you provided in tables and figures. When you report your findings, do not manipulate data and refrain from biased judgments and interpretations that might misdirect readers.

In the discussion section, you are to interpret your findings and report any new understanding or insights that emerged from your research. One of the best strategies is to compare and contrast research findings from multiple angles by benefiting from the related literature. Make sure that you take a critical stance without overinterpreting the research findings. This section should be in line with the aim(s) of the study and should be linked to the literature review and, if applied, should use the theoretical or conceptual framework as a lens to interpret the findings.

In general, researchers exhibit their expertise in the discussion section. You can highlight the significance of your paper and show that your paper fills a gap and contributes to the related literature, discusses the findings critically, and pushes the readers to think critically. It is generally effective to develop explanations based on the findings of the study, provide a deeper understanding by synthesizing the findings, and formulate a critical discourse based on the aim(s) of the study. In simple terms, this is where you report how your findings make sense and how you support the results by citing related literature, both supporting and opposing. Note that what you argue should be subjective, scientifically robust, reliable, and valid, yet not speculative.

#### Conclusions, Implications, and Suggestions

The conclusions, implications, and suggestions section is where you provide a synopsis of your findings and report your conclusions. It is also where you demonstrate your contribution to the related literature by distilling solid conclusions based on your findings. Be sure that your conclusions are in line with your research purpose and in the scope of the study. Again, it is also important to report the implications of the study and how it may affect the related stakeholders and what should be taken into consideration. Finally, providing suggestions is also very helpful for future research direction. Your suggestions can be critical in terms of setting a future research agenda and shaping future research trends. In this regard, provide solid and clear suggestions that indicate specific actions. Please also remember that the conclusions, implications, and suggestions section is where most people who are not in academia may show an interest.

#### References

References, along with in-text citations, are crucial in terms of supporting your ideas through empirical evidence and addressing this evidence. In addition, to avoid plagiarism, you need to cite and appropriately reference your sources. Providing a systematic and complete list of references is also helpful for those who would like to snowball some key studies and also helpful to show where the scholarly arguments come from and how other researchers can locate them. You need to be certain that you cited key references and that your references are relevant, recent, and listed appropriately according to the required referencing style. It is also important that references are well-balanced and linked to the overall purpose of the study. A well-balanced reference list provides sources that include counterarguments as well as supporting references. You should cite recent references so that authors have access to a current and up-to-date outlook regarding the research in question. Please also remember that citing relevant references proves that you did an in-depth prior reading and conducted a thorough review of the related literature on your topic. Finally, clean and proper citations and references are an indicator of how meticulously you worked on your study, which will leave a good impression on editors and reviewers.

#### Final Remarks

This chapter reports on how I approach writing a scholarly paper and roughly explains the anatomy of one. However, these are not golden rules but, rather, strategies I have used that have worked well thus far. When you write a paper, please remember that there is no perfect output; but there is a perfect effort you can apply.

Before you submit your paper, edit and polish it so that it shines on the desk of the editors and reviewers. When you submit it, you may get desk rejections, or you may be subject to meaningless, unfair comments (never forget the Reviewer 2 phenomenon — it exists). Deal with those reviewers, defend your arguments, convince them, and provide a sound rationale if you do not choose to revise your paper as suggested. During the editorial processes, you will have defeats and victories, but remain optimistic; if you view every criticism as an opportunity to make your paper better, one day you will experience the magical moment and hear, "We are pleased to inform you that your paper is accepted for publication." Please keep your hopes high, even if you are rejected on the first submission, and always remember that every paper eventually finds its home.

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