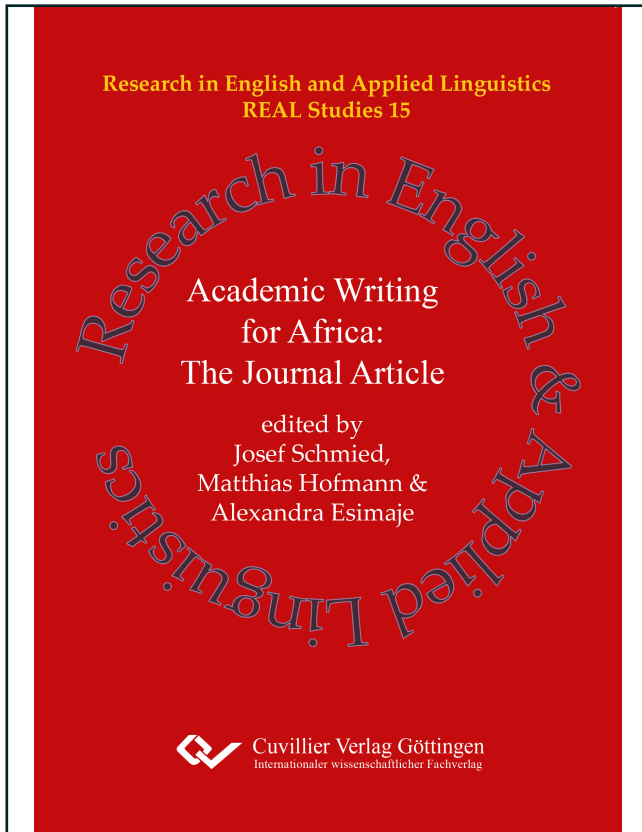




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## **Academic Writing for Africa: The Journal Article**



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# A Global View on Writing Research Articles for International Journals: Principles & Practices<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This contribution provides a global view in two senses: first, it claims that the principles and practices of good research articles in English are similar in most English Departments world-wide, and second, it emphasizes that the planning and writing of journal articles should start from a global perspective, i.e. the sequence of chapters should be planned first, the sequence of paragraphs in the sections second, and the individual sentences last. It is particularly addressed to young scholars and thus discusses how to find an appropriate topic, an appropriate journal, an appropriate title. It starts with modern key issues like finding a research question or a research hypothesis and key concepts like academic discourses, metalanguage, and genres, with journal conventions in the centre. The focus of this contribution is on global thinking and editing: The writer starts at the macro-level, the global paradigm, the sequence of chapters and headlines, and concrete examples are taken from current articles in journals that are easily accessible and recommended to African scholars. At the meso-level, managing the information and argumentation flow within and beyond paragraphs is particularly important for effective communication. Finally, at the micro-level, the controversial issues of intertextuality and plagiarism and of idiomaticity and transparency are discussed. All this is summarized in the conclusion, which gives advice to young African academics who wish to start a career within the English research community.

**Keywords:** Academic writing, global perspective, structure, plagiarism

## 1. Global views on Writing

### 1.1. Meanings of “global”

By “global” view, I mean something like a bird’s eye view, a top-down or holistic approach to journal articles and research articles. I distinguish between a macro-, meso- and micro-level: By macro-level I mean a chapter or a section, by meso-level I mean a paragraph and by micro-level I mean a sentence – and I think it is

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<sup>1</sup> The journal article is a broader and more neutral term. It is not so strict in its format (IMRaD), as explained. It can also be more theoretical and then it may also require more experience, if it is a good journal article. Therefore, I have focussed on the research article which may be difficult, but in the end easier for a young scholar. A research paper can be relatively restricted, and if it is data-based, it will also be accepted more easily.



really unfortunate that most writers or most style guide books concentrate on the micro-level only. I think that planning a project and a piece of writing (Buckingham 2016) should start from the highest level and result in a draft, after which a considerable amount of work still remains to edit the text. I usually tell my students: “Don’t hand in your first draft.” Students do not spend enough time on editing – and on planning. So I tell them that they should spend at least 20% of the time on the planning instead of writing immediately. They often just manage a first draft and I tell them: “This is only half of it, you still need to invest a lot of time and hard work – at least 30% of the whole work is on editing.”

Another global perspective is the writing of a journal article focussing on the result, and here a bird’s eye view should mean some 20% introduction, 60% main part but also 20% conclusion; from experience, I can say that in many texts the conclusions are often too short and do not really wind up enough what should be the main focus of the text.

## 1.2. Meanings of “writing”

When I say writing here, I want to emphasize that today we have all types of literacy, not only the traditional literacy or the now well-known multimedia literacy. I also mean the literacy of (reading and writing) academic texts, which includes the collection of information, the processing of information and the presentation of information in a new context. This literacy is an advanced skill – much more advanced than the usual four or five skills that we teach in practical language classes. I see the presentation of academic knowledge from a constructivist perspective, and I would like to emphasize two main points: the first is discourse community, the academic readership/audience in our field; the second is genre, the text type conventions expected in our discourse community (Swales 1990, Swales/Feak 2012). These expectations are partly in contrast to the writers’ personal identity, because writers always say something about their background, their academic training, etc. and they have their own way of liaising with their academic discourse community (Hyland 2012). And all this needs to be learned; writers cannot wait for a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”, as Wordsworth wrote. Academic writing is a craft and hard work - partly also, because academic writing includes a complete set of metalanguage, which is expected in the discourse community and enshrined in the conventions of the discipline.

## 2. First steps: From pre-writing activities to first draft

### 2.1. Finding a topic

Before writing, there is reading. This is partly because there are two approaches to finding a topic: first, top-down, from theory to practice, through reading. Theoretically, young scholars read “the literature” on the topic, find a gap and say “this gap needs to be filled”. If it is a large gap, the topic has been narrowed down, so that

it is manageable, operational (Buckingham 2016: 5-10, with examples). The problem is that this is a really difficult approach because we can never be sure whether there is really a gap or whether we just have not read enough. A lot of students thus postpone their writing, because they have the feeling that maybe it is only them who see the gap. A better approach through reading is to find a model article in the research literature and say “I would like to do something like this, hopefully with my own new data”. The second approach is a bottom-up approach: from data to analysis, i.e. when I see some striking or at least interesting feature in the data, I can say “this must be worth exploring” or maybe even more difficult “I can do some statistical analyses or maybe even find the patterns in the data that I did not see with my own eyes”. And then in the data, beyond the purely statistical, I can “see a rationale”, maybe a functional reason why the language is used in this way. These two different approaches are possible; in the end, finding a model article is probably the easiest way for a young scholar, but that depends on the accessibility of journals.

## 2.2. Finding a journal

Although in many developing countries researchers and PhD students are given lists of accepted journals (of course, international, peer-reviewed, with high impact factor), it seems more advisable to follow the advice (or only the footsteps) of peers and colleagues, who have successfully published in journals. Alternatively, you could approach journals that you know from reading in your field and that have published useful model articles (cf. 4.3. below); they may be interested in continuing the academic discourse in the same field.

## 2.3. Finding a research hypothesis

One of the most challenging tasks for young scholars is to set up a working hypothesis (Buckingham 2016: 9). It does not have to be a final one, hypotheses are provisionally set up on the basis of reading and accepted as a basis for further research. Many hypotheses cannot be tested convincingly and many cannot be confirmed but this can still be a good academic result. Actually, a clever strategy is a null hypothesis, e.g. “there is no difference between two groups of people interacting or two types of language usage for us”, and if you can reject a null hypothesis, which says there is no difference, then you can prove that there is a, maybe text linguistic, maybe sociolinguistic difference between your datasets. It is easier to falsify a hypothesis by finding just one case that does not fit. Research hypotheses and research questions are much more important in English studies today than 50 years ago, as they were taken over from natural and social sciences. They serve three purposes at the beginning of an academic discourse: to determine what kind of research the writer will be doing, to raise expectations in the readers, and to identify the specific objectives the study will focus on. Formulating a good research hypothesis is a methodologically central issue in advanced writing and has



to be practiced in the context of advanced empirical research methodologies (Hofmann 2018).

## 2.4. Finding a research question

For young researchers, it may be easier to formulate research questions than research hypotheses, bearing in mind that many research questions may be asked, but few can be answered satisfactorily with the tools available (cf. section 2.5. below). I can give you two examples of my own research questions, although I have to admit that in this case the research questions are not written down explicitly in these two texts: the first one is my PhD thesis, which was on “English in Tanzania”, and the research question there is “Is Tanzania a second language country or an international language country (which is sometimes called a foreign language country today)?”. Because in contrast to Nigeria, the biggest and prototypical second language country in Africa, the situation in Tanzania then and even today is not so clear because they have Kiswahili as a nation-wide accepted national language. In my postdoctoral thesis, I compared British and Indian English using an established corpus with different text types or genres and here the research question was “Is the variation in relative constructions greater between the varieties [i.e. British and Indian English] than between different genres within these varieties?”, and the result was, in a nutshell, there is more variation within varieties than between British and Indian English. But of course, grammatical constructions – like relative constructions – are never observed as distinguishing varieties of English as much as pronunciation and the lexicon, for instance (cf. Quirk et al. 1985). But these would be typical research questions, which are expected today, but were not expected 30 years ago when I wrote these texts.

## 2.5. Critical issues: access to infrastructure, equipment, etc.

Finally, I also want to mention that it is not always easy to answer research questions adequately, and you have to ask yourself critically: “Is, what I can do, sufficient to answer this research question in an academic way?”, for instance “Can I collect recordings that are good enough for differentiating patterns in phonetics?” or “Can I collect ‘representative’ samples of social media discourse in Nigeria as a basis for an analysis of Nigerian usages of ‘democrat\*’?”.

Nowadays, questions of technical equipment seem negligible, but not in all African universities: everyone has a smartphone, but of course recordings in a conference hall are not good enough for linguistic analyses – at least phonetic ones. Or African scholars have to ask themselves: “Is my internet connection stable enough, so that I can use HTTrack to download (huge amounts of messy) newspaper texts over night?” “Do I have at least access to an eye-tracker to do reading research seriously? ... so that I can see how readers process language, where they stop, when a word is unclear or where they drift off, when they have their own idea related to what they hear or read?” (cf. Schmied & Hofmann 2018).

Unfortunately, many interesting research questions cannot be answered satisfactorily, because they cannot be transformed into an operational research strategy, at least today, by a poor individual researcher in a specific (unfavourable) research environment – and this applies to African scholars more than to others.

## 2.6. Finding a title and subtitle

Another way of focussing, and marketing an article for a journal, is an attractive title and often subtitle. I can suggest three paradigms of finding an appropriate title: for instance, you could have a “sexy” quotation which is striking, provocative or at least interesting, and then after a colon explain the topic and the method if possible; or one could indicate a broad research area in the title and then add a more specific research question; or, one can have a research question first and then explain what that means in context. The choice is between a more sexy, journalistic title and a more descriptive one, between a striking quotation and more academic phrases indicating data (*MA theses*), methodology (*corpus-linguistic*), theoretical framework (*systemic functional grammar*) or context of application (*education, teaching*).

Here are some examples from texts written by participants in the Benin workshop. A title can include a strong statement like “Religious Bigots or Extremists?”, which is, of course, provocative in a university context, but maybe not in social media; or, “PDP Administration Actively Sustained a Crisis Profiteering from it”, a clear attack on a political party, but easily found in social media. A much more serious article would be “Constructing Religion and Politics in Nigerian Terrorism News”. Of course, the same article can be used with a different, more journalistic title, like “Nigerian Terrorism News” – a broad area, so you might want to specify: “Who Blames Whom and How?” This is basically the same as “Religion or Politics? Linguistic Devices Used in Nigerian Terrorism News”. The writer has to decide which of these possible titles is appropriate for which journal.

Another interesting case is a nice African language exercise in one of the workshop articles entitled “Bokyi noun class system”, where I noticed that, like in most drafts, the headlines or the titles could be made much better. One possibility is “A New Analysis of Bokyi Noun Phrases: Noun Classes, Agreement, and Valency”. The “new” promises something, the three linguistic details make it sound scholarly. You can also ask explicitly the research questions “Is Bokyi a Bantu Language? A New Analysis of Noun Phrases”, and of course, noun phrases include Classes, Agreement, and Valency. Both of these articles are quite attractive and still linguistically specific enough. The question of which one is better depends on the journal, where you want to “sell” this article.

In more general terms: What is an effective title? It is effective, if it fulfils one or more of the following functions: A title has to indicate the theoretical, regional or academic discourse context in which the text should be understood. It orients the reader towards the topic research area. In form, it strikes the balance between brevity and clarity. It must be really understandable, so it should indicate enough, but not reveal too much: it should not pre-empt your conclusion and the main point:



It should make further reading beyond the title, beyond the abstract, interesting, attractive, maybe useful (cf. Hannay & Mackenzie 2017: 51).

I can illustrate this here with four examples of complex titles again from my own writing. One is the book we have edited recently called “Working with Media Texts. Deconstructing and Constructing Crises in Europe”. Another one is an article entitled “Complexity and Coherence in English Student Writing, Specifically in Hypertext Learning Systems” which I wrote almost 20 years ago at the beginning of the world-wide web when hypertext was relatively new. Or “Where the grass is greener? Colour terms in East African English”. Many African languages have relatively few colour terms and then questions can be asked like: “How many colour terms are used by African writers?” or “Is *rose* or *pink* in the second or third circle of colours?” The fourth title is, similarly, a wide area plus a specific case: “Corpus-Based Contrastive Lexicology: the Case of English *with* and its German Translation Equivalents“. These are examples of what I think could be effective titles in the sense that they may make the reader curious and they may convince the journal editor to accept the contribution.

## 2.7. Abstract?

Whether an abstract should be written before or after the journal article is an old question. In any case, the abstract must be revised after the article is completed, especially if the writer feels that he/she has not be able to completely deliver what he/she had promised at the beginning of the writing project. This distinguishes a journal abstract from a conference abstract, which is more a promise of something that may be delivered by the time the conference takes place and is (usually) not altered even if the presenter cannot keep all the promises and may not be able to fulfil the expectations. In our discussion of pre-writing activities, an abstract may help the writer to focus his/her ideas and is thus for many a good exercise before the actual writing of the article.

## 2.8. Scaffolded writing

Finally, we have to start writing. In many writing classes today, scaffolded writing is practised. As the metaphor suggests, this approach assumes that this is a process of enculturation into social practices with supported interaction with people who have already mastered the discourse, as is the case in an academic writing workshop. For individual writers, this is less easy, but generally it may help the writer to complete the big global task, when a complex text like a journal paper is broken down into smaller fixed structures like the IMRaD paradigm discussed below (4.1. – 4.2.). Then many small steps or obligatory and optional moves (Swales 1990) steadily take the writer further and further. Good practice examples may also serve as models, which make the task less daunting than a complete individual start from Introduction to Conclusion. Of course, this approach also can only lead to a first draft, which has to be revised constantly to bring it closer to the ideal set up by the self-critical writer and, in some cases, the constant interventions of experienced mentors that guide young scholars from academic novice to research discourse (Fig. 1).

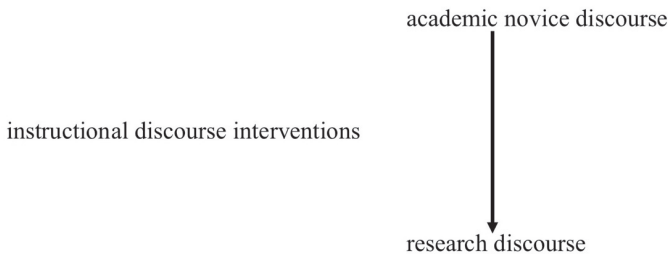


Figure 1: Through instructional discourse from novice to research discourse.

### 3. Key concepts

#### 3.1. Discourses in academic communication

Over the last few years, European universities have developed not only writing centres (even for writing in the mother-tongue), but also academic writing classes. Whereas previous student generations seem to have acquired academic reading and writing skills independently (and on the basis of a traditional secondary school education), the “digital natives” seem to need more help. This may also be the case because the rules have become stricter and the genre conventions are more established today in many types of academic communication.

The complexities, functions and features of academic genres have been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Schmied 2015). Although some key concepts are used in all types of academic discourse, we can distinguish between popularisation discourse (e.g. press releases), instructional discourse (e.g. lectures) and research discourse (e.g. PhD theses). The focus of young researchers must be on the research discourses in their PhD theses, conference presentations and journal articles. Journal articles are becoming more and more important and have started replacing PhD theses – a key publication for academic careers. Therefore, the Benin workshop tried to use mentors’ instructional discourse to guide young researchers from novice to research discourse that may be accepted by international journals (cf. Fig 1).

#### 3.2. The academic research cycle and its key medium – the research article

The research discourse is fully integrated into what is commonly known an academic research cycle (cf. Fig. 2). We first try to identify a gap in the overall knowledge complex, try to create knowledge, to assure that the quality of the knowledge is good enough for publication, and then in our publication we want to disseminate the knowledge so that other people can develop ideas for further continuing this cycle.



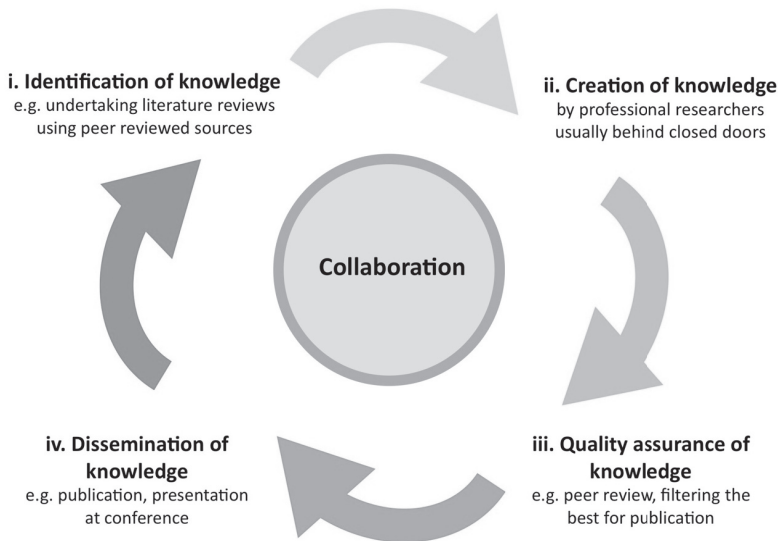


Figure 2: The Academic Research Cycle (Figure taken from Cann, Dimitrou & Hooley 2011: 15).

When we accept a prototype approach to genres and knowledge creation, we can identify the research article today as the central element in the academic research cycle because it ensures the fastest and most reliable dissemination of academic knowledge. Other research outputs, like writing book reviews, writing project proposals or making conference presentations, are also valid, have to be learned, but they are not as decisive for scholars' recognition in the national and international discourses as a research article. Thus, all other academic genres are peripheral (Schmied 2015: 11).

### 3.3. Academic metadiscourse, metalanguage

The terms metalanguage and metadiscourse, i.e. language about language, are related to the information management or the reader guidance beyond the plain facts, the proposition. We look at the global text management, the argumentation structure, the sequencing of chapters and sections in an academic article, from the top down to paragraphing, and then to the cohesion between the smallest text passages. Academic words and phrases signal the position of a text passage in the global argumentation structure: *define* in the conceptualisation section, *research question* or *hypothesis* in the initial methodology section, but also in the results section, *conclude*, *limitations* and *further research* towards the end in the conclusion, etc.

This global text management works in a similar manner to the local text management. All these cohesive devices help to produce cognitive coherence in the

mind of the reader, and the writer controls this by giving signposts like *first*, *second*, *third* or *thus* or *because*. Similar cohesive devices can be found on all discourse levels, the micro-level of sentences, the meso-level of paragraphs and the macro-level of sections or chapters. All this contributes to the writer-reader interaction, including the direct form of address, for example. It is always a big question whether or not a writer in an academic context is allowed to use *you* or *we*. This is decided on the basis of the disciplinary conventions and the journal conventions.

Another important point is the writer's commitment to the truth value or reliability of what he/she is saying. Many comparative PhD theses on hedging in different writing contexts (Germany, China, and Africa) are written today and, of course, modal auxiliaries or modal adverbs are the clear signposts that a writer has to use when he/she wants to say "I think this is correct, but I am not completely offended, if you disagree with me". So *maybe* or *arguably* is chosen by writers to distance themselves from their research but still take their research seriously enough. Occasionally, though this is a little culture-specific, you may use boosters like *certainly* or *in fact* or *this is a fact*. But in academic writing usually we find more hedging than boosting. I cannot go into details here, however, a vast amount of secondary literature on meta-language is available today (e.g. Hyland 2005).

## 4. Focus on the journal article global paradigm (the macro-level)

### 4.1. The IMRaD/IMAC global paradigm spreading from Natural Sciences into Humanities

A very common global paradigm is spreading from Natural Sciences into Humanities, and that means into Linguistics and even a little into Cultural Studies and Literary Studies. We have several levels, one of which is called the global vs. local planning, and although there are, naturally, different types of planners, global planners are at an advantage: they can take a global strategy as a skeleton, and thus find it easier to demonstrate that they are good writers. Such writing strategies have been revealed by Swales (1990) in his model of moves and steps, the CARS model, which is an acronym for Creating A Research Space, i.e. to identify a gap to fill in the introduction of a research article. We can expand this model to include the complete text of a journal article.

If we look for a global design model for research articles we immediately come across IMRaD, which stands for Introduction, Methodology, Research, And Discussion. However, I want to modify this slightly to Issue, Methodology, Analysis, and Conclusion (IMAC): instead of Introduction I refer to Issue, or "why is this interesting for the reader?". The Methodology is, of course, a major part and expected chapter heading; it cannot be changed. The Analysis may include a Discussion and Interpretation, and finally the Conclusion can often be extended systematically in several sub-sections. The most interesting aspect about this paradigm is that it can be applied to abstracts as well as (empirical) research articles and BA/MA/PhD theses – and the corresponding general academic lexemes and phrases can be taken over from subject- and culture-specific conventions easily.

## 4.2. Signposting paradigms: the IMRaD/IMAC structure in the lexicon

This global paradigm can be signalled, for instance, by standard CARS or Issue phrases like “*not enough ... research on this topic, yet*”. Other such phrases include “*it is relevant, it is important “in the academic discourse”, or “for practical applications”*”. Or you say “My short article here is *focussed*, it is *data-based*”, although the data will be small, and it is *carefully researched*, and the results are *reliable*, of course, it could be “expanded” or “it is just a small contribution” in a wide mosaic in the wide discussion framework that we know from the literature.

The second major section in this paradigm is the Methodology. Sometimes this includes the literature review, including the evaluation of the literature, in a separate section. Then it depends on the topic whether you find “hypotheses” possible, whether you can think of good “research questions”. You may want to introduce the database and the procedures or the tests you are going to use before you actually do these tests in the next chapter and analyse your data, and then you can have different types of proof evidence, you can simply state examples if you have a more qualitative approach; if you have a quantitative approach you need statistic tables as summaries. You can also have figures, because they are better illustrations, visualisation; when you find significance in the appropriate significance tests, then the reader is convinced that what you have done for your data should also be the case for other data that are collected in a similar way.

The final sections are in the Conclusion, and this concluding section is often too short in young writers’ articles, which is why I am giving you several suggestions here. One possibility is a summary. If you do not have a summary at the end of the analysis, in this case a summary would start with signal words like “in conclusion” or “we have shown” or, if you want to be more tentative, “we hope to have shown”. It can also be an interpretation (“This proves that a small study may have major consequences”) or what I call contextualization, which often contains phrases like “in a wider perspective”, etc. For young researchers it is often advisable that they themselves indicate the limitations of their studies (before others do it), and then say “More data should be collected” and “Similar analyses on a different database could be carried out”. “Further research is necessary” is a little elementary, but if you can specify what type of research seems logical after your contribution in the large research mosaic, then that is always a good ending, whether you want to do it yourself or would prefer someone else to continue.

## 4.3. Paradigm examples from academic journals

Now we look at a few concrete examples of these global paradigms. I have selected articles from journals which are very accessible also from Africa: *Brno Studies in English* is accessible online, open for African scholars. The example has a good, comprehensive title (according to the principles discussed in section 2.6. above) “Epistemic modal verbs in research articles written by Ghanaian and international