

Editorial Introduction: Volume 4, Issue 2: Writing as method

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Although writing is an essential academic skill it is rarely discussed. Students are expected to attend sessions on research methods covering topics such as interviews, statistics, coding, ethics, fieldwork safety, and so on but there are very few opportunities to learn about writing itself. We all read books and articles, and these are the main research “outputs” that academics are encouraged to produce, but how are these publications actually created? How do our notes, observations, reflections, and other data sources somehow make their way onto printed page? In particular, I want to stress that writing is not simply a matter of converting information into a written form but is something much more fundamental to the creative process of research itself.

In this editorial for *Routes* I want to share a few thoughts and suggestions about the academic writing process. I should start by stating that these are derived from my own experience and there are, of course, many other ways in which people have approached academic writing.

The first stage for me is usually a simple list of ideas sketched out in a notebook (my current favourite is Leuchtturm but many people use Moleskine). I also have one or two favourite pens, almost always fountain pens that seem to glide across the page.

The next stage is transferring the initial sentences or small blocks of text to an electronic file on my laptop which I label very carefully to avoid any confusion further down the line. When I print out this first draft it is often no more than a simple list with a few tentative sub-sections, but as I add my hand-written notations the document begins to take shape.

Writing has a circadian rhythm: some people prefer to write in the morning whilst others find afternoons, or even later in the day to be preferable. I’ve always found mornings to be my best time, often punctuated by a run or a walk. I certainly feel freshest in the morning when I might even catch a few sparks of creativity from while I was sleeping. By writing I also mean the careful reading through of draft documents, preferably printed out rather than read on-screen.

As your writing begins to advance further it is sometimes helpful to imagine that you are joining a larger conversation about a particular topic. These are the other readers and writers that you are trying to connect with. As you read other people's work it is useful to think about what kinds of writing speak to you. Just as musicians draw on many influences in building their own distinctive style you will find that most academics can highlight particular books or articles that have played a formative role in their intellectual development. Since geography is such a broad field there are many possible models of writing to draw on. Does your work inhabit an intermediate zone between the social sciences and the humanities? Or is your ultimate aspiration to publish an intervention in *Nature* or one of the other major science journals?

It can be very helpful to ask other people to read your draft text: after all, the aim of any text is to be read, to find an audience. For most student work the readership is quite small, perhaps only your supervisor and a few other people, but with *Routes* or any other journal the potential audience is suddenly much larger. Do think about who you are writing for. Who are your imaginary readers? Yes, dear reader, I am thinking of you right now!

There are a range of further practical aspects to writing and publishing, including the need to follow journal guidelines (they often differ) and how best to respond to feedback from editors and referees (don't be afraid of constructive criticism). If your work is accepted for publication there will be further tasks such as checking through the proofs (this can be a somewhat fraught process). I won't go into these final steps in any more detail here but don't hesitate to seek advice from more experienced academic authors over any aspect of the publication process.

Lastly, please don't be tempted to cut corners by using AI. These new technologies might be useful for scanning documents or analysing large data sets but they are not a substitute for human creativity.