# 4

# Reading and Writing Academic Texts

In this chapter, we describe how academic reading and writing are interconnected processes. Smart readers can become smart writers, and if students have a clear sense of their ideas, their writing is likely to be clear as well.

Nonetheless, instructors should remember that individual differences may affect how students learn to read and write academic English. For instance, students within one class may have varying linguistic skills and vocabulary knowledge. They may also have little or extensive experience with academic language either in English or their first language. In addition, students may bring varying cultural expectations and attitudes toward reading and writing, which might be influenced by their families or society. They may also have different motivations for reading and writing and use a wide range of strategies to approach the reading task based on their first language literacy skills (Birch, 2007); as Nergis (2013) has shown, students' awareness of their own reading strategies may help them better understand the texts they read. All of these factors can play a large role in how students approach reading and writing.

### Reflective Break

Think about how you learned to read and write in academic language.

- Were those two skills taught together or separately?
- How does your reading and writing in academic settings differ from your reading and writing in other contexts?

## Academic Reading

Reading is a complex process that is crucial for students' success. Knowing about students' reading experiences early on can help teachers tailor their instruction to students' needs. For instance, an open-ended survey can provide critical insight into students' experiences and attitudes toward reading. After completing the survey, students can interview each other and ask questions such as: *How much reading (in English) do you do per week? What is the "reading culture" of your country? Of your family?* A class discussion can help highlight similarities and differences in students' experiences and in their prior academic settings.

Another important piece of information that teachers will want to gather from students concerns their reading strategies, because academic reading differs from other kinds of reading. Astute readers understand their own reading strategies so they can adjust them when they encounter any difficulties while reading. Helping students become aware of their reading strategies can provide enormous benefits and help them read academic texts successfully in their other courses.

So how can we develop savvy academic readers? First, we can directly teach effective reading strategies to students and discuss what successful readers do, which may involve modeling tools and approaches to reading. Second, we can help students become aware of the strategies they already use. Students could read a short passage, keep track of their thoughts as they read, and answer the following questions: *How did I prepare to read? What did I do when I got stuck?* Students can then share their answers with the class as the teacher creates a large list on the board, and then collectively analyze patterns.

### Reflective Break

Do you have different strategies for academic reading than you do for other kinds of reading? In other words, how would you read an academic text differently than a novel or a magazine article?

### Before Reading

When preparing to teach reading at any level, it is helpful to think of dividing activities into three main actions. The first step is preparing students for reading *before* they read. Just as athletes stretch and warm up their muscles before a race, students should also stretch their "mental muscles" so they are ready to read and understand the purpose for reading the particular text. Teachers can help students prepare for reading by ensuring that they have the vocabulary they need for the text and are familiar with the topic. Teachers can also show students how to look over the texts quickly, or skim, to gain a sense of how long the text is and how it is organized. Skimming can also help students reflect on what they know already about the topic and help them make predictions about what the text will be about. Overall, prereading activities can engage students in the topic and help them feel confident about the reading task.

### During Reading

A second important step is providing structure during the reading process to ensure that students stay on track and read for the right purposes. A common way to help students focus on a text's purpose is to create a graphic organizer, or "the reader's picture of the writer's words" (Flemming, 2008, p. 399). Graphic organizers are commonly used to help students make sense of the texts they read, keep them engaged in reading, and help them remember what they read. They can also help students understand the text and develop original opinions about an idea or ideas in the text. Jiang and Grabe (2007) synthesize important research findings on graphic organizers and provide several examples of ones that can be used for numerous types of written texts.

Table 2 illustrates a graphic organizer used to support students' reading of source-based texts. You can adapt this chart to help students examine short texts (i.e., a paragraph or a news article) or evaluate longer texts that include many sources (i.e., research reports or academic essays). The main point is that students learn to read for a purpose: to learn new information, determine the author's viewpoint, and process new ideas. Students can also see that academic writing has a clear purpose and audience, which reinforces writing instruction.

### After Reading

Finally, students should "cool down" after reading and assess what they have learned. Questions that focus on students' comprehension are typical; however, there are additional ways that students can expand on what they have read. At this stage, they can summarize the text or critically respond to it by evaluating an author's argument, extending an author's idea to their lives, applying the main idea to another context, or discussing their opinion of the text. For an excellent resource on reading research, see Grabe and Stoller (2011).

**Table 2. Sample Graphic Organizer for Academic Reading**

| TEXT | What kind of text is it? (e.g., news article, lab report) | Who is the text written for? | Why did the author write it? | What is the main topic of the text? | How is the text structured? Which information comes first? | Which details or information supports this topic? Are there any graphs or tables? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | |

### Reflective Break

- How might the sports metaphor of warming up, performing, and cooling down help your students improve their approach to reading?

## Academic Writing

Within the broad field of academic writing, there is considerable variation in writing across disciplines. For example, engineers may write somewhat differently than linguists in terms of preferred sentence structures, vocabulary, and text organization. Nonetheless, there are core principles that all academic writers must learn, those for which teachers can prepare students.

### Teaching About Academic Writing

One way to teach students about academic writing is to provide both effective and ineffective models of academic texts. Model academic texts can give students a better understanding of a text's main elements and purpose. For instance, if students are learning to write an essay, they can examine model essays and dissect their structure by evaluating the purpose of the text and intended audience, analyzing its construction and language use, and discussing how the text is related to other academic texts. Students can also examine how grammar, vocabulary, and language are used in the text. By providing and examining model texts, academic texts become salient to students and help them learn how to construct their own texts.

### Reflective Break

- What are the most important features of academic writing?

### Teaching Students to Become Academic Writers

Scaffolding writing tasks is important for guiding students step-by-step through the writing process, just as scaffolds temporarily support construction workers working on tall buildings. For example, if students

are learning to write a paragraph, they can use templates for support as they learn to write and become familiar with academic genres. Figure 1 provides a sample template that can be used to help beginner writers learn to construct a paragraph. The visual display of information can

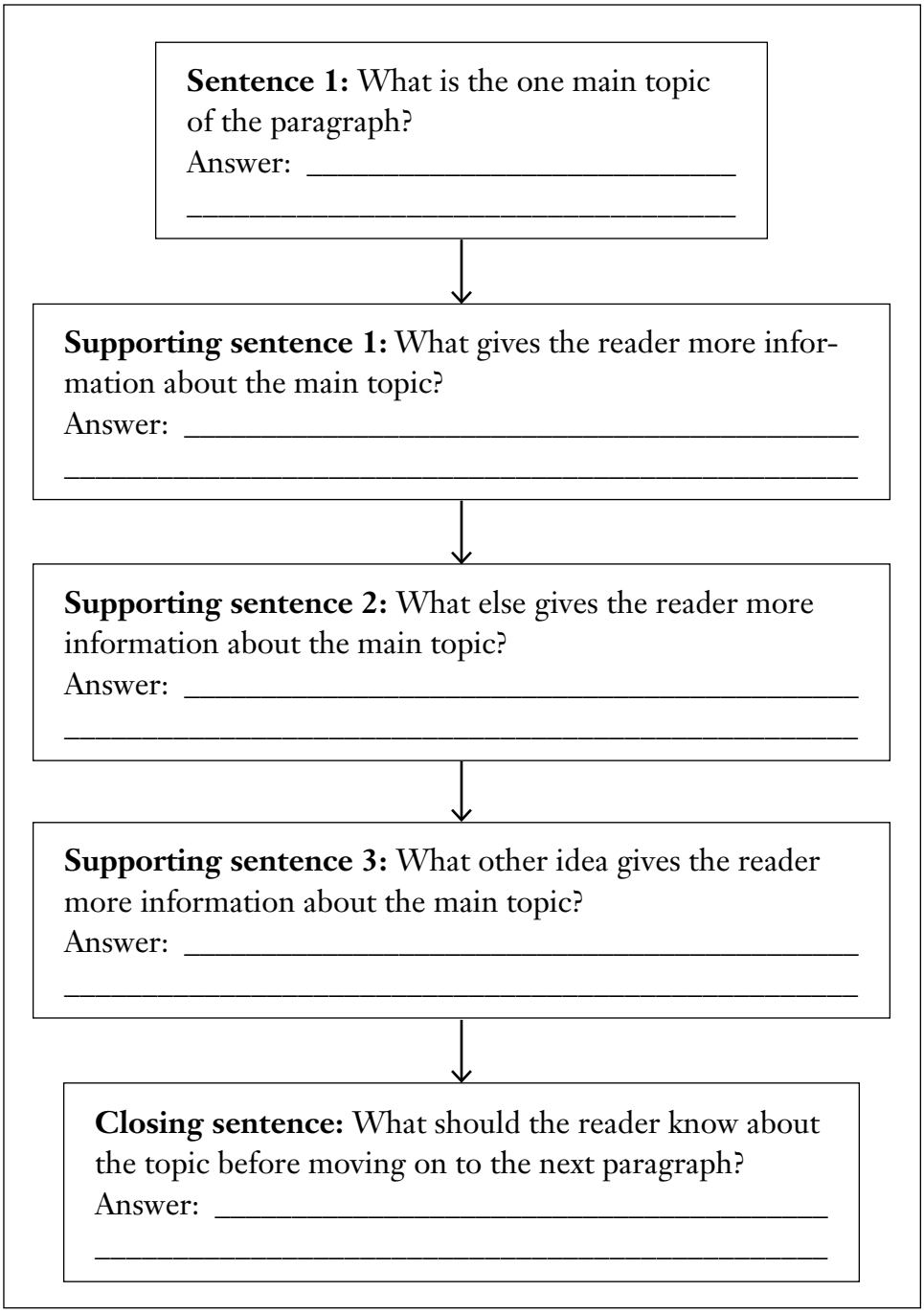


*Figure 1*. Sample Template for Writing a Paragraph

help students see how ideas in a paragraph are organized, and students can write their answers directly below the question prompts. They can then use this template to write a paragraph in regular prose.

Writing assignments should also parallel students' abilities. In other words, asking beginner writers to write a lengthy diagnostic essay is not feasible if they have not yet learned how to write a paragraph. Thus, teachers should create assignments that increase in difficulty and complexity and are appropriate for students' levels. In this way, teachers can "spiral up" skills and levels of difficulty in carefully sequenced combinations. For example, you would teach students how to write essays and summaries separately and then combine the two genres later in a summary and response essay, allowing them to see how genres combine to create new genres. (For an excellent resource on teaching academic writing, see Partridge et al., 2009.)

## Assessing and Responding to Writing

### Formative Assessment

Assessing students' writing is a fundamental component of writing instruction. Teachers can assess students' writing either formatively (during the learning process) or summatively (at the end of the learning process). If teachers assess formatively, then their comments should help writers improve something specific. Ongoing formative assessments may include feedback on drafts and proposals, as well as anything that helps students understand their strengths and weaknesses. There are typically three different sources of feedback: the instructor, the student, and students' peers. Instructors are the primary providers of feedback on students' work; however, students can learn to develop their own review skills and help each other revise their texts.

Teachers need to consider several factors when preparing to give feedback. First, they must think about how they will respond to students' errors. The effectiveness of error correction on improving students' texts has been a controversial topic in the field of second language writing, but overall, research shows it is neither feasible nor useful to address every single error. (For more on this topic, see Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013.) Too much feedback can be confusing and counterproductive, even though students may *want* us to correct every error! Teachers need to decide whether they will respond to students'

errors directly or indirectly and whether they will respond to sentence-level errors or larger errors that interfere with meaning.

Second, teachers must consider the timing of feedback. Students should have many opportunities to receive feedback as early as possible in the writing process. What teachers can do is provide feedback to students at varying stages of the process as they brainstorm, develop their ideas, write outlines or proposals, and begin to draft their work. Teachers who are involved in all of these writing stages can help students understand the writing process and feel less frustrated.

Students may also give feedback to each other at varying points of the writing process as peer reviewers. Some teachers have mixed feelings about peer review; they worry that students are not qualified to provide feedback or may be unfocused during the task. Students may also have mixed feelings about peer review and worry about hurting their peers' feelings. Some students do not feel confident enough in their knowledge of English to feel that they are providing valuable feedback, and believe that the teacher is the only one who can and should correct their papers.

Nonetheless, peer review can be beneficial when structured properly because it can help students learn to edit critically. Teachers can help the peer review process run more smoothly by giving students concrete rubrics to fill out while they read each other's work. For instance, questions that are focused on particular parts of the text (e.g., *Does the introduction provide enough background information? Is the thesis clearly stated at the beginning of the paper?*) can provide structure to the peer review process and help students feel more comfortable evaluating writing. Teachers can also conduct a training session with students and walk them through evaluating a sample text. In other words, the class can read the same paper and discuss the paper's strengths and weaknesses. Teachers must remind students to assess the *writing* (not the *writer*) and provide both positive and constructive comments.

### Reflective Break

- How would you respond to students who say that they cannot provide adequate feedback because they are "not the teacher" and do not have all the right answers?

### Summative Assessment

Summative assessments may include an in-class writing task, portfolios of students' work, or final papers. If teachers assess summatively, they would not expect students to use feedback to make subsequent revisions. Many teachers choose to use a rubric to make sure that they grade each student systematically. You can opt for a holistic rubric, an analytical rubric, or one that includes both holistic and analytical qualities. Rubrics can also be tailored to the particular writing task (e.g., a compare-and-contrast essay) or they can be used to evaluate general writing skills (e.g., organization of ideas). They can also be used to assess speaking activities (see Appendix A for sample analytic and holistic rubrics).

Clear rubrics can help students focus their editing processes and align their text with teachers' expectations. Students should be given rubrics at the beginning of the writing process so they know exactly how their work will be assessed. For this reason, it is crucial that rubrics are written in language that students can easily understand and that all points are clearly explained to students. Teachers outside EAP classrooms may not use a rubric or any kind of checklist to evaluate students' work; therefore, an advantage of using one in an EAP classroom is that students learn how to evaluate their own writing.

## Plagiarism

Another major component of academic writing includes borrowing from outside print and electronic sources appropriately and citing these sources using a particular format (e.g., the American Psychological Association [APA] or Modern Language Association [MLA]). If students fail to do so, their text may be considered plagiarism. There is a lot of research on plagiarism in second language writing, and the issue is fairly complex. One important implication from this body of work has been the distinction between plagiarism that assumes cheating with an intent to deceive and "patchwriting," a term which refers to a strategy that inexperienced writers use and is defined as "copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym substitutes" (Howard, 1993, p. 233). This distinction has helped focus on students' writing skills to highlight the necessity of effective instruction.

Instead of focusing on detecting plagiarism, we feel it is much more effective for teachers to focus on teaching students how to borrow from sources. (For a more detailed discussion of research and practice, see Pecorari, 2013.) Nevertheless, teaching about source use involves time, explicit instruction, guided practice, and sensitivity to the complexity of this issue, as students must fully grasp the sentence-level skills that can help them use sources appropriately (i.e., paraphrasing, summarizing, citing, and quoting) and fully understand conceptual notions of authorship, plagiarism, and common knowledge. For this reason, teachers should begin teaching these components of source use in beginner levels and work on these skills as much as possible (for an excellent discussion of teaching source use in all language levels, see Conzett, Martin, & Mitchell, 2010).

### Reflective Break

- How is plagiarism viewed in your academic setting? What are the consequences?
- What are other teachers' concerns about plagiarism? How do students feel about it?