

Blank pages

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Blank pages

November is academic writing month, and here I am writing. In the Peak District, where I live and do my writing work, it's chilly and misty. At the end of the day, I'll take my labrador, Jussi, for a run around on the moor to wind down. The fog can make it spooky up there, but I have my trusty companion for reassurance.

It's a spooky time of year. In a recent writing workshop with some delightful doctoral students, I joked (lamely) that my Halloween costume of choice was a white sheet. A ghost? No. A blank page. A blank page should be an enticing invitation: I'm waiting for you! Come, cover me with ideas! Compose! Express! Create! But on those precious writing days, in the chilly, foggy Peak, that blank page can feel more menacing than inviting. My fear is that I won't be able to write, and my precious writing day will be squandered: Don't waste time! Start! Quick! Think! WRITE! And then the moor fog is in my head.

So, how do I clear the fog? How do I stand up to the menacing page? My strategy of choice is to simply start writing. I write anything I can - however tenuously related to the topic - and I keep writing. I call it 'page vomit' - inelegant, I know. After a while I look back at the messy page and start to move things around, fill in the gaps, replace words, refine sentences and so on. As the old adage goes, you can improve a bad page; you can't improve a blank page. It's how I'm writing this blog post.

Students get spooked by a blank page too. I know because they tell me. But I think they get spooked for different reasons. For some, it's because they have been led to believe that academic writing is a series of strict rules and opaque conventions. For them, a blank page is a trap, a place to misinterpret the mysterious code of assignment briefs and criteria, where there is a strong risk of failing to meet their lecturers' academic writing expectations.

It's no wonder they worry. Our expectations about writing are often hidden, even from ourselves. We could no doubt write the assignments we set. But recalling how we learnt to write like that - and communicating that skill to others - is another matter. Writing knowledge is what Polanyi describes as [tacit knowledge](#), because most of us learnt to write informally - implicitly - as we progressed through academia. And this means that we struggle to articulate concretely what good writing looks like. (Anyone who has tried to formulate an academic writing criterion for their assessment rubric will know exactly what I mean).

I don't have any answers (yet) when it comes to rubrics. That's for another post. But I have shared what I do when I am confronted with a foggy head and a blank page (yes, the vomiting). And here are some suggestions from the field of English for Academic Purposes for helping students with their blank pages. I do hope you will add your own suggestions in the comments: 1) Think and discuss with colleagues what your

expectations of your students' academic writing are. How have you formed those expectations? What are they based on? And how and when do you teach students how to meet those expectations on your module. The tasks in [McGrath et al. \(2019\)](#) might be helpful here. 2) [Share examples of your assignment](#) with students and discuss with them what it is about the writing in those assignments that works. Highlight examples of effective language use and try to think about and convey *why* they are effective. 3) Ask students to [grade an assignment](#) for writing quality and justify the grade they give. This task can provide a window into how clearly your expectations have been conveyed in the criteria, and to what extent your values around writing are shared by the students. 4) Think about whether your assignment needs to be written in academic English at all. Is there an opportunity for students to experiment with different genres, to write freely without feeling constrained by an academic voice that they don't (yet) feel is their own? Opportunities to be [playful with language](#) and to express themselves in different ways may help students find that voice.

It's time to take Jussi to the moor. The fog has cleared, and I have tidied my blog post into what I hope is an interesting, informed, coherent and clear text. At the end of the day, isn't that what really matters when it comes to writing?

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