



BOOK REVIEW

Air & Light & time & Space: How Successful Academics Write

Helen Sword

London: Harvard University Press (2017) pp.266

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ISBN 978-0-674-73770-9

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The reason for choosing this book to review in a Special Issue on Research and Children in the North is that once we have done our research, collected and analysed the data, we need to write up the research in order to disseminate it so that our research can have an impact. Hence, the need to write as clearly and concisely as possible, and as you would expect from a book on writing, this book is very well-structured and easy to understand. The book title comes from the title of a poem by Charles Bukowski and relates to the excuses people use to explain why they have not written. At one level, this book provides examples of academics' excuses for not writing. However, Sword provides habits to develop, or feed, so that the academic writing process can be made easier, or at least, less difficult.

The book is based on research conducted with 100 academic writers, and questionnaires completed by 1,223 staff and students who attended writing-development workshops from different disciplines and countries. Using this data Sword proposes that every academic writer needs a 'house' with four BASE cornerstones – Behavioural, Artisanal, Social and Emotional. At the end of the introduction there is a diagnostic exercise so that the reader can work out where they are in relation to each of the cornerstones. The book is then split into four sections covering each of the four cornerstones: behavioural; artisanal; social; and emotional habits. Behavioural habits relate to finding time and space to write with key habits of mind such as persistence, determination, passion, pragmatism and 'grit' and this section includes the perennial arguments about little and often as opposed to binge writing. I found this part of the book particularly helpful as it is an ongoing struggle to find time for writing. This is followed by artisanal habits which include creativity, craft, artistry, patience, practice, perfectionism and a passion for lifelong learning.

Social habits cover the people that successful writers, even ones who typically write alone, will tend to rely on: colleagues; family; friends; editors; reviewers; their audience; and students. Important habits of mind are collegiality, collaboration, generosity, openness to

criticism and to praise. Emotional habits relate to thinking that emphasises pleasure, challenge, and growth. Related key habits of mind are positivity, enjoyment, satisfaction, risk taking, resilience and luck. As Sword writes 'the road to productivity will be a long and tedious one unless you can find meaningful ways to pave it with pleasure' (p166). While Sword refers to luck what she is referring to is that 'lucky' people have connectedness, self-confidence, perseverance and positivity (p175).

Set out like this, with four types of habits to consider, it appears to be a tall list to be a successful academic writer, but the key to this book is to find out what you individually can take from it. The book does not only cover habits to consider but also how to handle other issues such as dealing with rejection, in particular when a manuscript is rejected for publication.

Sword also includes short personal anecdotes and reflections which illuminate rather than distract from the advice and experiences of others. All but one of the quotations are attributed to an academic with their discipline and institution provided, this shows how advice is not limited to specific fields or countries. This humanises, personalises and grounds the research findings, making the book more 'real' and 'authentic' and the advice less daunting.

One potential downside of reading the book could be the comparison of Sword's writing to our own but obviously the author is aiming to inspire, rather than discourage, academic writers.

There are 'Things to try' sections at the end of each chapter, for example a career-advancing/life-advancing quadrant to complete (p177). Sword provides what could be seen as risky advice on how to prioritise writing, by putting off teaching preparation till the last minute, what she refers to as 'playing chicken with teaching' (p186). There are also extensive references with an explanation of their genre and usefulness. As has been illustrated Sword is keen on metaphors in order to explain and demystify writing processes, and one metaphor I particularly enjoyed was when academic writers are asked to make multiple revisions which one contributor compares to being 'nibbled to death by ducks' (p183).

All academic writers, no matter what stage of their academic career or their level of success, would gain something useful from reading this book. For PhD students, in particular, the interview quotations from academics are an excellent example of how to incorporate interview data to illustrate points that are made. This book shows us how other people write and we can, hopefully, learn how to write more clearly and, perhaps, more often by reading this book.