

Book review: How to use storytelling in your academic writing: Techniques for engaging readers and successfully navigating the writing and publishing processes

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Keywords

Academic writing, pedagogy, storytelling

Key contributions/Pathways to collaboration

- Illuminating the text of *How to Use Storytelling in Your Academic Writing*.
- Modelling a book-review mode that emphasises collaboration.

Abstract

This book review illuminates Pollock's (2021) text 'How to use storytelling in your academic writing'. In the longstanding discipline of literary criticism/study, a book review is often the work of a single author and written to expose the reader/audience to the contents of the book under investigation (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). The review we have offered here adopts a writing style of a conversation about the book between two academics, and thus posits a new mode of book-review writing. The intent of the article is to challenge expectations of what counts as a book review. The review itself recommends the book as a valuable contribution to the collection of academic books on academic writing.

Introducing the book

We are writing this book review as academics. Jo has transitioned from senior lecturer to adjunct senior researcher at the University of Tasmania (Australia). She continues her academic interests through consultancy projects (scholarship of teaching and learning). Geof was the co-ordinator of research supervision professional development at Queensland University of Technology (Australia), then a Reader in Education at

Birmingham City University. He is currently the Principal Investigator at *The Investigative Practitioner*, a management consultancy. We have been academics most of our professional lives.

Because the book we are reviewing is designed for academics, we have written our review by drawing from that aspect of our professional status.

Some important information about the book

How to use storytelling in your academic writing: Techniques for engaging readers and successfully navigating the writing and publishing processes

This 195-page book is written by Timothy G. Pollock, the Haslam Chair in Business and Distinguished Professor of Entrepreneurship, Department of Management and Entrepreneurship, Haslam College of Business, University of Tennessee-Knoxville, US. The eBook version is priced from £20/\$26 from eBook vendors. The print version can be ordered from the Edward Elgar Publishing website: <https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/gbp/how-to-use-storytelling-in-your-academic-writing-9781839102813.html>.

Timothy Pollock provides a comprehensive account of the important elements of academic work through the lens of ‘storytelling’, based on his 27 years of successfully navigating the complexities of the academic-writing landscape. The book provides a map to navigate the complexities of dissemination and collaboration in academic writing, prompting academics to value storytelling. Born of experience and reflection on experience, this book showcases reasoned practice interspersed with practical wisdom. It is clear that the author has investigated his own practice and grounds his practice-led recommendations in theory and literature. As such the book is relevant to both novice and experienced academics.

Pollock’s account is inspired by his own academic writing challenges. As such it celebrates the value of personal stories – something that academics in the current culture of celebrating stories of lockdown and resilience in the face of COVID-19 are coming to value. It is indeed a time for considering the relationship between stories and other aspects of academic life.

The book is designed as a tool kit for academics at any stage of their career. The nature of academic work is complex, and we found that the book held relevance for the multiple roles we play as academics.

Our conversation

In our first conversation about the book, we agreed that it prompted us to recognise the complexity of our academic lives. As book reviewers we represent two different facets of this complex life: one of us has retired from academic life while continuing to work on its fringes; the other is on the cusp of retirement but not yet quite ready to give up academic life and happy to secure this with ad-hoc academic projects. We told stories about ourselves ‘dressed’ in the roles of reader, author, teacher, mentor, researcher, reviewer, and editor. We talked over each other (this phraseology might confront some readers and we are using it to indicate the storytelling nature of our exchange), sharing observations and insights prompted by this book.

As Readers we felt the book helped to unpack what it is we enjoy about academic writing and illuminate why we learn from some papers and struggle with others. The book is a model of effective storytelling that engages the reader and is readily understood.

Jo: I remember blaming myself. ‘The author(s) of this paper, this book, must be so clever; I am not intelligent enough to read and understand’. Automatic self-blame ceased after reading academic work characterised by simple and profound sentences, logically linked, woven through with a compelling story, challenging my thinking without obscuring what I already knew. Such writing makes me want to hug the author and say ‘thank you’. I realised that opaque and obscure academic writing can be simply bad writing.

Geof: I resonated with the way in which the book was written from a practice base. The author was illuminating his own writing practices.

Looking at the overall structure of the book, we agreed that it models what it is advocating in its chapter-by-chapter exposition of how storytelling is intrinsic to the process of inquiry. The structure has an effective layering in which an overall model of operation is posited, and then different parts of the model are explored in detail. The section in the Introduction chapter titled ‘Book Structure’ (p. 5) sets out the book’s contents and purpose.

Geof: I found it an easy-to-read book, and one to which I could return with specific problems in writing and feel recharged.

Jo: In short, it is easy to read and understand. I like it because I don't have to struggle to find the thread of the argument; it develops naturally and logically. Simple is best to communicate profound thoughts.

As Authors, we felt that the book teaches how to prepare manuscripts for maximum strength. It advocates telling the story of how the research project was designed and conducted rather than simply writing words about the research. Creating a story provides a narrative about the overall construction of the research as well as its outcomes.

As authors we are often on the receiving end of feedback, and this book illuminates how to receive, contextualise, and apply feedback. The book lives up to its stated goal of helping [the reader] 'improve your writing and increase the chances your insights are read and understood' (p. 11).

Jo: I shivered as I remembered previously written papers that, in hindsight, I hoped no one, not even my mum, would read. I told Geof of multiple drafts and deep engagement with feedback from co-authors. It was an agonising process of finding a way to write coherently together what was interesting as well as warranted by the evidence.

Geof: I thought the Freytag Pyramid model (p. 8-15) was a useful device for scaffolding academic writing. It provided insights not only into ways to write, but more importantly, into how a reader might have expectations in reading an article. Pollock uses an example of his own collaboratively written (published) article about 'why good firms do bad things' (Mishina et al., 2010) explaining how he and his colleagues wrote the article.

As Teachers we recognise that when a teacher or university lecturer uses stories in their teaching it is recognised within a pedagogical framework as using Narrative. This term refers to a particular pedagogy within a collection of pedagogies labelled 'recognition of difference' (Lindgard et al., 2001). Using stories in adult education can be both invigorating, in that any topic comes alive with the help of a personal story, or mind-numbing as students think, 'Not another "war story"!'. Stories form an important part of the vast wealth of knowledge from lived experience. In Chapter 1, Pollock uses stories effectively and recounts stories being used to advance thinking, such as and giving the example of a story Einstein used to develop his theory of relativity.

Jo: Discussing the book with Geof helped me to examine the challenges of teachers using ‘war stories’ – stories that are unthinking personal accounts that fail to connect with the topic they are intended to illustrate. I still remember a teacher who seriously disturbed his students with multiple, detailed, very personal stories in a subject called ‘Oral History’. Stories to advance and inspire generative thinking are crafted to communicate what is important. I hereby repent of all oversharing/war stories and intend to use stories for educational, not cathartic personal, purposes.

As a curriculum designer, I have somewhat internalised Bloom’s taxonomy and, while this book does not specifically reference that resource, I noticed that the structure and content of its chapters resonate with the intent and theory of Bloom’s taxonomy. Each topic content is presented directly and succinctly, let the reader know; accompanied by explanations and examples, let the reader understand. As I read and discussed each chapter, my understanding progressed to applying and analysing what I was learning to my academic practice (including telling the story of our review process). Discussion with Geof was generative: we were prompted to envisage our own examples and to create our own story.

Geof: Having taught ‘productive pedagogies’ (Lindgard et al., 2001), I was aware that one of the anomalies of Narrative is that more is not better. Just using more stories as an educator does not improve the quality of teaching, even though the use of a single story in a lesson might enrich it.

As Mentors we felt that the book provides great advice to both novice writers (how to start, how to keep going, what to aim for) and developed writers (when, what the author calls ‘the first shitty draft’ (Pollock, 2021, p. 117) still needs rescuing or targeted support).

Geof: My most satisfying role at the moment as an academic is mentoring others in academic writing. Having a textbook that supports some of that practice is a real asset.

Jo: Geof and I both enjoy mentoring, although it can be hard to mentor effectively. I have been supporting a master’s graduate to translate their research into a peer-reviewed paper. The mentoring process has highlighted for me just how much I have learned in how to tell the story of my research. This book breaks down what I have integrated and internalised. It reminds me what

I need to remember and communicate about how the different components can be crafted into a story and lift the paper from a report into an account of knowledge-seeking and finding.

As Researchers, we spend a large portion of our professional time involved with academic writing. There is a constant need to do our own research or undertake our inquiries to advance our knowledge areas. This book is an excellent example of practice-led inquiry in that it incorporates theory and literature, and personal practice experience and observations with a clear articulation of the processes of practice and thinking about practice before and after writing or preparing an article for publication.

Jo: Talking with Geof about how this book is an example of practice-led inquiry was illuminating. We interrogated each other on what we think are important components of academic writing and how that intersects with the kind of research we do.

Geof: As qualitative researchers, we are often exposed to positivist forms of research. It was refreshing to read inspiration, strategies, and tools to communicate your findings in this passionate apologia for storytelling as an intrinsic and integral part of academic life and academic work. Many qualitative researchers will be familiar with stories as data, but this book encourages stories for quantitative data.

As Reviewers we are motivated by our desire to advance knowledge in Higher Education. Pollock has deconstructed academic writing, and we believe the clear guidance he offers will facilitate anyone writing friendly and constructive reviews that nurture rather than crush the author.

Geof: As a result of new projects involved with journal publication, my academic practice has embraced reviewing. It is useful to have a text to refer to when helping potential journal authors get their research published.

Jo: I find reviewing challenging, because writing fair and constructive feedback takes thoughtfulness, commitment to improvement, and time. My own views on feedback resonate with Pollock's (2021) advice.

As Editors we have the additional responsibility of helping to manage a variety of academic writing into the structure of a journal. The ways that Pollock's book deconstructs the nature of academic writing provide useful advice for us in our roles

as editors. In particular, we see this as valuable in the unenviable task of desktop rejection, helping us to provide constructive and helpful feedback.

Jo: I take my role as editor very seriously. The feedback I provide can significantly contribute to the academic development of authors submitting papers to our journal. The ASRHE approach of open, collaborative review is designed to ensure that authors receive constructive and actionable feedback that provides a pathway to high-quality presentation of their research, suitable for publication. The editorial comments and advice I aspire to write for authors (especially those whose papers are not accepted to progress to review) are a cut-down version of the content in this book.

Geof: Working as an editor requires supporting colleagues and unknown fellow travellers to meet the identified criteria for a journal. Having a textbook that deconstructs academic writing allows my feedback comments to have some substance about the problem I am perceiving in the writing.

Prior roles

We are credentialed academics via persevering through doctoral research training. Thinking about our (earlier) selves as students, and based on our personal learning experiences while PhD candidates, we believe that this book provides the broad sweep of communication requirements and opportunities that are required for entering academia. It encourages collaboration and presents practical wisdom for managing the perils and opportunities that this can involve.

Geof: When I embarked on research there were few discussions about what constitutes academic writing. I welcome this textbook as a support for emerging researchers endeavouring to master a writing genre or set of genres for which there are not always explicit rules.

Jo: Writing, particularly academic writing, is difficult work, requiring perseverance and emotional resilience. It is a genre, with many sub-genres deriving from disciplinary norms. The peculiarities of academic writing take time to learn and absorb. This book makes explicit and accessible the knowledge I learned by painful trial and error. I wish I had been exposed to the information as well as the warmth and encouragement embedded in this book. It makes enjoying the learning process for academic writing possible, because it provides a 'map' for writing – guidelines on what is important to include or exclude – but also gives latitude for creativity and innovation.

Thus, after reading, discussing, and reviewing this book, we recommend it as a useful resource. It is of particular value to those whose academic work involves their own writing about research as well as mentoring others in this element of academic practice.

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