“ASK THE PROFESSOR”
about …
GOOD ACADEMIC WRITING

Pātaq: (Question)

Why do we HAVE to do ‘academic writing’? It sounds boring to me.
And what is ‘academic writing’ anyway?

Professor Alison Jones replies:

Ae, we have to if we want to be recognised by the wider research and scholarly communities – which we do! But ‘doing’ academic writing is not as bad as it sounds. Academic writing, as we will see, just follows a form of logic. And that form of logic is politically and intellectually useful.

Many of us get intimidated by the idea of ’doing’ academic writing. But this is not because we can't write or think well. Few of us have difficulty writing to friends. And most of us find it easy enough to talk about our research or theoretical ideas, and to argue about these.

But we also know that 'what is in my head' or 'my good ideas' count for nothing in an academic research environment unless they are written down. (There is a world of difference between having a chat about what you think and forming your ideas into a piece of writing that can be ‘peer-reviewed’ in order to be taken seriously – we will discuss the significance of peer review in a later issue of MAI Review).

There are good reasons for academic work needing to be in written form.

Research is about contesting ideas (argument), and about gathering evidence to support your argument. This evidence might be theoretical (it refers to ideas and arguments) or empirical (it refers to data) or both. In the western university tradition, if arguments and evidence are to be properly contested they have to be recorded in writing so that others can refer to them accurately. Writing therefore enables us as researchers to engage in careful communication with others. Academic writing is simply a formal way of engaging in research conversations with others in New Zealand and throughout the world.

Why does academic writing get such a bad rap?

… because a lot of it is so bad it's enough to put you to sleep (and maybe give you a nightmare). It is boring, full of jargon, and assumes we already know more than it tells us. We assume we must be stupid because we can't understand it but actually it is the writer who is often at fault. But one of the reasons we find some academic writing so hard to read is because it is bad writing. Many academics write badly. Don’t ask me why. Maybe they think that if hardly anyone can understand them, they will seem to be smarter than everyone else? Or maybe they just can't write well. But you are going to be better than that.

Academic writing can be good writing. What is good academic writing? Good academic writing attempts to be clear to the reader and not vague, or overly flowery and metaphorical
(good academic writing acts to teach the reader). It relies on evidence and argument presented according to certain rules. If everybody is playing by the same rules, everybody knows what the game is. And it also shows itself to be engaged in an on-going conversation with the writing of others in the field.

Your writing will be good academic writing if it has these ten elements, seen from the point of view of the reader. The piece of writing …

1. is shaped around one clear question, and explains what that question is from the outset
2. tells the reader why the question is important for the world to know about
3. accurately and thoroughly informs the reader what has already been published (or not) about this question or others related to it
4. provides evidence (data and/or argument) the reader finds convincing
5. tells the reader how and why the particular evidence was collected, and why particular theoretical arguments or concepts were used
6. is made up of paragraphs, and these contain only one point each (at the beginning of the paragraph)
7. indicates how each paragraph addresses the question. There are no 'bits' that are not shown to be relevant
8. considers counter-arguments or counter-examples where they are relevant
9. sums up its argument, evidence and its significance at the end
10. is not rushed and tense, but goes slowly and carefully, taking the reader along by the hand, meaning that the reader feels alert but relaxed.

We will discuss these elements in more detail in future issues of MAI Review.

Kia pai tō whakatuhituhi!

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