

# IS ACADEMIC WRITING ACCESSIBLE?

## An Evaluation of Comprehension

*August Forck*

### **Introduction**

One of the most important components of teaching English is ensuring that students comprehend what they are reading. If students cannot understand what they are reading, then they are not absorbing all of the information that is necessary for their development. Essentially, if one cannot *understand* what they are reading, they are not reading.

Despite its importance, comprehension tends to be emphasized less as students grow older. They become expected to comprehend new information and new levels of writing with little to no assistance. This is especially true when students move to universities. However, this reality hardly seems fair. After all, as students move through school, they are being exposed more and more to official academic writing – a style of writing filled with so much jargon and new information that it can sometimes take even the most experienced students several readings to fully comprehend the information presented to them. Knowing how important comprehension is to reading and how important academic texts are to college students, the following question can be posed: is academic writing accessible?

## Review of Literature

Academic writing is a style of writing used in colleges and universities, normally written with the purpose of sharing new ideas. To give an even clearer idea, academic writing has three characteristics. According to Chris Thaiss and Terry Zawacki of George Mason University, it is important that academic texts have the following:

1. “Clear evidence in writing that the writer(s) have been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study,” (5)
2. “The dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perceptions,” (5)
3. “An imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response” (7).

This essay, for example, could fall into the category of academic writing. Let it be acknowledged that the irony of an academic text critiquing the accessibility of academic writing is fully understood; however, the author has a rubric to follow.

One of the biggest problems with academic writing is that it can be hard to understand. There have been many studies to back this up, showing that academic texts written by master’s level students are shown to be “more complex and less understood” than people with a PhD (Samraj ScienceDirect). The vocabulary and discourse-group-specific lexicon – language that is only commonly known by people within a specific field of study – is often what throws students off the most. Another part of the comprehension issue comes with the fact that college students are not always taught *how* to write academically. A study published in *Studies in Higher Education* found that students have trouble applying the general rules of writing to essays and texts within different contexts (Lea and Street 157-172). One might suggest that this is a simple fix – what else are teachers paid for? However, as Ursula Wingate of King’s College London points out, “General advice on academic

writing is usually provided in writing guidelines presented in course handbooks, and through tutors' feedback on student essays; however, these methods have limitations" (Wingate ScienceDirect). In addition to not knowing how to write, students sometimes have difficulties with understanding the purpose of academic writing. Two studies published in *Research in the Teaching of English*, one by Jennie Nelson and another by Taffy Raphael, et al., found that students had increased understanding and improved scores on academic writing pursuits once the purpose of that writing had been established (Nelson and Raphael et al.). So, based on previous studies conducted, it can be firmly established that, in order to comprehend academic writing, students must be able to understand both the content, vocabulary, and purpose of the academic text.

## **Methods**

College students at the University of Missouri - Kansas City were asked to participate in a survey to measure their understanding of and relation to the text.

Students were asked to read excerpts of three texts, varying in genre. The first text was an excerpt of a piece of academic writing called "The Invisible Labor of Access in Academic Writing Practices: A Case Analysis with Dyslexic Adults" by E.Q. Wang and A.M. Piper. This article, as the title implies, focuses on adults with dyslexia and the struggles that they face when trying to read and understand academic texts. The second piece was an excerpt from the fictional novel, *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams. The novel is part of a series that involves an ordinary man who is thrust into a life of fantastical space exploration after one of his closest friends is revealed to be an alien. The final text was a poem by Emma Lazarus called "The New Colossus," a piece that celebrates the creation of the Statue of Liberty. Each of these excerpts can be found below, in the section marked "Excerpts".

After students read these excerpts, they were asked several subjective, experience-based questions. Students were asked which text was the most difficult for them to understand, why they thought their choice was the least understandable text, and if they thought that academic writing was inaccessible. Students were also asked to disclose demographic information about themselves that might give insight into why each student might relate more to certain texts.

## Results

After reviewing the excerpts, participants were asked which text they found the most difficult to understand. *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was cited as the easiest source to understand; only 12.5% of respondents chose that source as the least clear. When asked to rank the comprehensibility of this excerpt on a scale from one to five – one being very comprehensible, five being not at all – 75% of participants ranked this work of fiction as a one or two.

37.5% of respondents found the poem “The New Colossus” to be the least accessible piece. Participants ranked this piece as fairly easy to understand overall, with 87.5% of respondents ranking it a three or below. Respondents who thought that this excerpt was the most challenging often cited the vocabulary and the metaphorical nature of the poem as the issue. “The third one was the most difficult as it had unfamiliar language...and it mentioned history I didn't kno [sic]...” said one participant.

50% of respondents found the academic text, “The Labor of Access in Academic Writing Practices: A Case Analysis of Dyslexic Adults” to be the most difficult. In ranking the difficulty of the piece, there was a four-way tie – 25% of participants ranked this piece a one, 25% percent ranked it a two, 25% ranked it a three, and 25% ranked it a four. Reasons why this text was rated most difficult include that readers found the text uninteresting, reported that the vocabulary and lexicon were hard to understand, or that

the sentence structure was difficult to follow. “Source 1 [was the most difficult]. The sentences were very convoluted and as they ran on to elaborate and explain the subject, there was so much distance between what I was reading and the subject that I found it hard to follow and keep track of what was being talked about at times,” said one respondent. “There was also some level of jargon and acronyms that made it more difficult to understand.” Another participant responded, “...I had to read a few sentences several times to process it.”

Though only half of respondents said that the academic source was the most difficult to comprehend, all respondents said that they believed that academic writing has an accessibility problem. When participants were asked why they thought this, the same sentiment was expressed nearly every time: academic writing is not written for people who are less educated on a subject, or for people who are not within that field of study. “[B]eyond just difficulties with gaining access to materials because of paywalls, the style of academic writing is (I think intentionally) difficult to understand for the common person,” said one participant. Another responded, “In my opinion...I think [researchers] expect their readers to already be well educated on the topic (I mean, I’d figure that’s the type of people that normally read them). However, as someone completely unfamiliar with the topic most times, I struggle with academic writing and language.” Several participants also pointed out problems within the American education system, like education inequalities and language barriers. “The American system teaches almost solely in English leaving anyone who has English as 2nd, 3rd, 4th languages etc to struggle on topics creating unfair accessibility,” one respondent noted.

Participants were also asked about demographic information that might help provide insight into how writing might be inaccessible to specific social groups. Most respondents found at least one aspect of their identity that could affect their relationship

to academic texts. Participants cited a variety of things that they thought made an impact on their interaction with academic texts, like:

- “As a part of the LGBTQ+ community, it can sometimes be difficult to find academic texts that accurately depict my community or talk about issues that are important to LGBTQ+ people.”
- “I have severe vision issues, [so] some things are not easy for me to follow and get [sic] it is easy to get confused.”
- Another participant cited ADHD as a reason for their difficulty processing academic texts. One participant said that being out of the practice of reading hindered their ability to comprehend academic texts, as well.
- So, with all of this information collected, what exactly does this mean for academic authors and their audiences?

## **Discussion**

The data collected from respondents in this survey seems to yield fairly clear results. Of the three texts provided, many of the college students who participated had the most trouble comprehending the academic text, and all participants agreed that academic writing is inaccessible. This is, of course, a major problem; if one of the main purposes of academic texts is to spread new information and ideas, then it is imperative that everyone is able to access these resources. After all, knowledge is power. This also creates a problem for college students, who are regularly left to interpret these sources on their own without a proper understanding, sometimes at the expense of their grade.

So, how does one make academic writing more accessible to students and the world at large? Looking at feedback received during the survey, several ideas come to mind. Students struggle to understand certain lexical terms within academic texts; perhaps more academic authors should take up the habit of

adding footnotes to their sources and use that as an opportunity to define or elaborate on certain terms that might not be known outside of their discourse group. Students with vision problems have trouble reading what is written; fonts and font sizes can be easily changed both by the author and publishers. Adding funny anecdotes or creating a unique author's voice can make a text more interesting. Focusing attention on authors who are LGBTQ+, Black, disabled, or members of other underrepresented groups can diversify academic writing, and can encourage others within those communities to write their own academic texts. Any of these suggestions could be implemented in academic writing to make it more easily accessible – and there are thousands of more ways that the issues noted by respondents could be addressed besides the ones suggested here.

Remember, though, the issues brought up in previous research. As mentioned in the “Review of Literature” section, another reason that students have so much trouble comprehending academic writing is their inability to write it themselves. As Ursula Wingate pointed out, some students find the instructions on how to write a good essay to be lacking, and the studies conducted by Jennie Nelson and Taffy Raphael et al. found that students were more likely to understand academic texts if they understood the purpose of writing. So, in order to make academic writing more accessible, it is also important that students are being taught how to be good writers – good writers make for good readers.

There are many ways to build a student's writing abilities. Linda Fersten and Mary Reda – two women whose entire careers have focused on university level education and English, respectively – made a collection of writing tips and exercises that focus on the growth of students' abilities and confidence as writers, aptly called “Helping Students Meet the Challenges of Academic Writing”. They discuss the importance of self-reflection in younger authors; they found that, when students reflected on questions like, “What does

it mean to be a writer?”, “How would you describe the process you go through as you write?”, and “Who should get to decide what ‘good writing’ is?”, students discovered both more confidence in their writing and a new perspective on the purpose of writing (Fersten and Reda 171-182).

With all of this laid out, it is clear that there are attainable solutions that would make academic writing more accessible. It is the responsibility of both authors and educators to make some of the changes necessary to ensure that everyone is able to access the information and ideas presented within academic texts. It will take some effort – changes to traditional academia do not often occur without great exertion – but this is an issue that cannot go to the wayside.

## **Excerpts**

The following are the excerpts of text that students were asked to read in order to respond to the survey.

### *Source 1:*

“Writing is the currency of academia. Although technology-mediated writing has been studied extensively in CSCW, we know little about how writing practices unfold with disabled people, such as dyslexic writers whose neurodivergence shapes how they process language. Our qualitative analysis reveals how dyslexic professionals simultaneously identify how editing tools break down on academic language; develop workarounds that re-appropriate other tools as language sources; cultivate ad-hoc collaborations to compensate for technology’s limitations; and navigate culturally ingrained ableist expectations for writing. We discuss how dyslexic writers’ experiences with shouldering invisible work to participate in academic writing processes indicates that current tools and services do not support their needs. We then draw on our findings to inform



design opportunities to make writing processes more accessible through changes to writing tools, institutional services, and peer review practices” (Wang and Piper).

*Source 2:*

“More of the planet was unfolding beneath them as the Heart of Gold streaked along its orbital path. The suns now stood high in the black sky, the pyrotechnics of dawn were over, and the surface of the planet appeared bleak and forbidding in the common light of day – gray, dusty and only dimly contoured. It looked dead and cold as a crypt. From time to time promising features would appear on the distant horizon – ravines, maybe mountains, maybe even cities – but as they approached the lines would soften and blur into anonymity and nothing would transpire. The planet’s surface was blurred by time, by the slow movement of thin stagnant air that had crept across it for century upon century.” (Adams 81).

*Source 3:*

“Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
 With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
 Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
 A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
 Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
 Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
 Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
 The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
 ‘Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!’ cries she  
 With silent lips. ‘Give me your tired, your poor,  
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!’” (Lazarus).

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## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What evidence does the author give that equates “accessibility” with “comprehension”? Are there any other markers for accessibility that the author seems to emphasize?
2. How does the author suggest a connection between lack of comprehension of academic texts and the self-identity of the student (i.e. LGBTQIA+, ADHD, Black, etc.)
3. Read the three excerpts included with the essay. How do your reactions to the excerpts correlate with Forck’s findings?
4. What conclusions does the author make about increasing accessibility in academic texts? Do you think these methods would be applicable in your own life?