

‘Front-loading’ Academic Writing in an EAP Programme

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Without doubting its centrality in the academic world, the formal ‘essay’ is not the only academic writing task with which we should equip our students, a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution to the potential requirements of academic departments. Regrettably, however, in some English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes, the essay can be overemphasised to the detriment of other forms of academic writing. Clearly science majors will encounter different demands than those confronting students working in the Humanities, the demands of writing up a scientific experiment differing vastly from those of discussing the development of characterisation in a Chekov play.

In a general EAP programme time available often limits the possibility of covering all the writing demands students may encounter (Horowitz, 1986; Reid, 2001). Accordingly, this paper will argue that in general EAP programmes, as opposed to ESP programmes with their specific subject-related goals, in the early stages of development of student academic writing abilities, it is useful to focus on the development of generic skills, habits and requirements that will hold them in good stead later, skills upon which the students can themselves build in their academic careers. This short paper describes one such writing approach, ‘Academic Reaction Papers’ (ARPs), a highly focused introduction to academic writing, one that from the outset emphasises features of form and style, both building awareness and equipping students with skills widely applicable throughout the broad field of academic writing.

Authors’ Context

Both authors currently teach on an intensive EAP programme in Japan. The

programme accounts for a substantial portion of the Freshman timetable and a small part of the Sophomore year. The stated goals include the brief, “To provide students entering ... who are not yet proficient in English with the language training necessary to participate fully in university life” and also the “development of the basic academic critical thinking and study skills that facilitate a rational and responsible approach to the acquisition of knowledge” (*ELP Staff Handbook*, 2005: 1). In order to achieve these objectives all Freshmen are required to take two compulsory year-long core subjects, Academic Reading and Writing (ARW) and Reading Content & Analysis (RCA). In addition, students take a range of compulsory subjects in listening, speaking, and learning strategies together with skill-focused electives. The overall programme is very intensive, even more so as students also take university-wide general foundation courses and subject area specific courses. In their Sophomore year students take a further writing course, spending a ten-week semester writing one research paper.

For many years the ‘five-paragraph essay’ (Gallagher & McCabe, 2002: 8-9), common to college composition courses in North American universities, was the primary focus of the ARW course. The results obtained revealed the students to be making considerable advances in their ability to read, think and write critically. Nevertheless, the authors identified notable weaknesses in the general quality of work produced, most notably the students’ ability to sustain a reasoned and logical argument over the length of an essay, to demonstrate critical application of thought to the ideas and words of other writers and to do so in a fully documented ‘academic’ format. Reflecting on the constraints of the programme context, the authors’ came to believe that an initial,

concentrated focus on general academic writing requirements would be of benefit, that a writing task shorter than an essay, one with clearly defined learner goals, would provide a means of developing specific writing skills that could later be developed in the writing of the longer, more complex and more demanding essay. After independent and then collaborative work by the authors, a read-react-write approach evolved, one emphasising generic skills it was felt all novice academic writers needed to have at their command. These were identified as follows:

1. demonstrate understanding of a source(s) (critical reading)
2. have a clear and thought-out opinion about the source(s) (critical thinking)
3. present ideas, with support, in a planned and logical manner (critical writing)
4. read and use sources in a variety of ways (support and in-text citations)
5. show accurately the origin of information and sources (citing works)
6. express themselves in appropriate academic language (register) and tone (voice)
7. present writing in an appropriate academic format (academic conventions)

The ‘Academic’ Reaction Paper

The reaction paper as commonly understood in academia is usually a fairly informal and expressive piece of writing in response to a source. It is frequently used in preparation for seminars and discussions in tertiary institutions, particularly in North America and as a genre is flexible and varied in its interpretation and demands. After much discussion the authors concluded that such a paper fell far short of fulfilling the needs of their students as identified in the seven criteria stated above. The authors therefore came up with their own interpretation of a reaction paper, designated as an ‘academic’ reaction paper (ARP) to distinguish it from the more common ‘garden variety’ (Fearn and Bayne 2004). The ARP has the specific aim of introducing students to and providing training

in the generic ‘academic’ reading and writing skills identified above.

ARPs are an academic training exercise that both precede the essay and may also be employed between essays. They provide an introduction to and practise in a variety of skills applicable to the extended writing requirements of the academic essay. In so doing they require students to:

1. connect their reading and writing
2. be objective
3. think critically
4. be academically rigorous

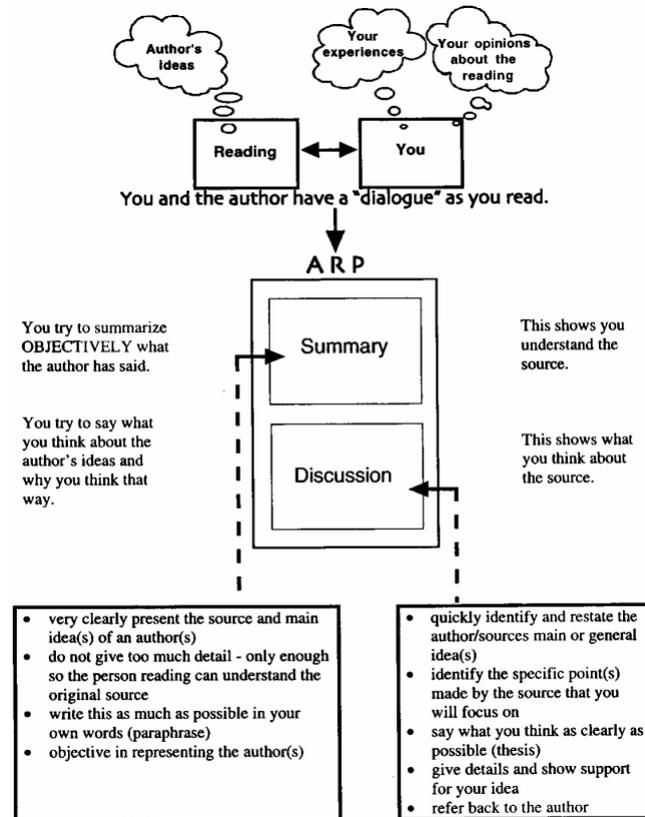
Additionally they allow the teacher to

5. focus upon specific skills
6. do 1~5 in short, focused assignments

ARPs are made up of two parts, a Summary and a Discussion. The Summary represents the key ideas of a given source(s). These must be read and then related in an objective, non-judgmental way. The Summary is one paragraph in length and forms no more than a quarter or a third of the whole paper. The Discussion must then respond to the source. This satisfies two key demands of academia, one, that students be able to digest information and understand it, and, two, that this understanding is confirmed and an opinion of it held, the basis of critical thinking. The Discussion may have one or more paragraphs and vary in length depending on the level of demand made and the ability of the students. In total an ARP should be between 375 and 550 words in length. Additionally both Summary and Discussion should be written in a way that enables them to stand independently. This acknowledges that students in their academic careers will be required to undertake a variety of writing assignments, some requiring a summary, others a reaction, and frequently in their essays a need to both summarise a source and react to it in a way which clearly distinguishes their own ideas from those of the source material. For example, a book review or a description of an experiment would require more descriptive elements. On the other hand, an argumentative essay based on an original thesis would involve minimal summary of sources and more discussion of their relevance to a claim.

To the above largely cognitive exercise based on reading, ARPs further demand that students conform to established conventions of academic writing. These conventions include aspects of presentation (title pages, font size,

highlight targeted skills and demands provide further and detailed guidance for students. The first model, for instance, presents awareness-raising of voice and register through specific phrasing and vocabulary use, introduces requirements such as in-text citations, author reference, Works Cited, and standard academic presentation conventions—all at a very basic level and based on a short piece of required reading. A later model reinforces all these elements and mirrors a more demanding ARP task involving research on definitions of a term from multiple sources.



word limits, etc.), correct rules and formats of citation, attention to register, structures found in academic writing such as the use of passive and third person, the use of authors as sources and accompanying framing phrases (e.g. "X suggests that...", "Y defines..."), and a general attention to detail and the final polished product. These elements of ARPs and the process(es) involved are represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Basic model of ARP process for students

Students entering our university are mostly new to (1) writing in English, (2) writing academically, and (3) giving their opinion. To help them conceptualize the task of writing an ARP, the idea is first presented diagrammatically (Figure 1). This diagram appears in an in-house reference text, *The Student Guide to Writing in the ELP* (20), which contains both descriptive information relating to the EAP programme and also specific examples and models of academic writing requirements. Models of ARPs that

ARPs are very flexible in the range of sources that can be used, the level of demand that can be made, and the particular learning intent on which they can be focused. As used by the authors they have progressed from a reaction to one paragraph from an article, a section of an article, a whole article, 2-4 articles and definitions of concepts such as 'race'. The authors have also used the idea in other universities for non-academic writing tasks such as book, film and song reviews. Most importantly, the short length and uniformity of the activity—all students reacting to the same text—facilitates peer and teacher review, multiple ARPs as opposed to one lengthy essay, and permits teachers to highlight and focus upon specific aspects of academic writing and thinking in a linear manner or as and when deemed appropriate. ARPs are then a versatile teaching tool in the EAP tool kit.

Conclusion and Concerns

ARPs provide practice in the fundamental academic requirements of any discipline by requiring a source(s) be read, understood and 'engaged' with. This means not only being able to summarise, but also being able to show a deeper understanding of a text by reacting in a logical and critical way, the result being presented in a formal academic manner appropriate to the institutional context. In accomplishing this task, the authors feel strongly that ARPs provide a credible and focused teaching exercise beneficial to the development of student writing skills across genres, academic and non-academic. Nevertheless a number of concerns have been expressed, among which are the following:

1. *The ARP genre does not exist in academia*

Yes and no. Reaction papers definitely exist. A Google search will give an idea of the wide variety and extent of their use. A majority are very 'loose' in terms of academic register and conventions, some a little more rigid. However, nowhere in our survey of the use of reaction papers did we find them used with the rigor we suggest or with such a focus upon the *development* of academic reading and writing specific skills. In content and intent ARPs most definitely exist, not as discreet and complete papers known as ARPs but as skills and requirements found in academic genres.

2. *How do students 'learn' to think critically?*

First and foremost ARPs clearly distinguish between repeating what an author says and giving the reader's reaction to it. ARPs not only make this distinction clear in the mind of students, they demand that the student does respond, does give consideration to the ideas of a text and write a response rather than a repetition. This is in itself a learning process and is in sharp contrast to student expectations based upon their experience at high school. Additionally, in the authors' context 'critical thinking' is a central and explicitly taught part of the programme and a cornerstone of the institution. Hence the first required reading for Freshman is excerpts from *College Thinking* (Meiland, 1981) and there is a two-week focus in the first semester on elements of argumentation. Students are expected to question what they read or hear and ARPs fit into this framework. The first ARPs are all linked to required readings, either in part or whole. The critical thinking process is aided in that the students discuss and dissect common readings, write about them in ARPs, then review each others work before re-writing.

3. *Isn't an ARP just a critique?*

As Swales and Feak (1994) point out a 'reaction' paper is a form of critique consisting of a target source and an evaluation. Additionally such 'summary-reaction' writing activities are commonly encountered in many institutions where they may or may not be termed an essay. However, as interpreted by the authors, ARPs are much more, both a critique and a vehicle; a tool rather than 'ends' in themselves. They are a 'beginning', an approach to the introduction of academic writing to (relatively) complete novices. As

such they can be 'geared' to introduce and practice specific elements of writing and facilitate the rapid development of student awareness and skill. They do so by engaging students in a writing task that is focused and lacks the complexity and demands of a full academic essay.

4. *Where is the 'process'?*

ARPs are short papers (350~550 words) and 3-4 are submitted over 7 weeks. Peer review allows discussion and reworking of the task prior to submission. An instructor, particularly for a focus on structure, style or academic conventions, may guide this. While students are welcome to resubmit a 'final' paper, (and may be asked to do so) we see the 'process' of improvement being evident in subsequent ARP assignments. The process is between ARPs rather than within one. Each ARP should 'raise the bar' in terms of expectations and also the length and difficulty of sources used. A portfolio of written work maintained by each student permits individual review and reference.

5. *ARPs establish a misguided idea that 'form' is more important than 'thought'.*

Such a view is to misunderstand the intent of ARPs and to underestimate the abilities of our students. Put simply, ARPs ask students to focus on five areas: sources, critical reaction, appropriate writing, appropriate citation and appropriate presentation. A student could potentially fulfil four of these but write a quite vacuous reaction. Similarly, a reaction could be one of incredible insight but couched in a very conversational register and presented in an inappropriate manner. 'Form' and 'thought' go together; part and parcel of what constitutes an academic paper. Recognising the time constraints of most EAP programmes ARPs 'front load' aspects of 'form' but do not do so at the expense of cognition. Most students are capable of rapidly understanding and adopting appropriate academic form early in their academic careers. This being so why not make it a requirement; give the incremental practice required? Doing so is not achieved at the expense of cognition. Rather, it permits students from the outset to appreciate the nature of academic writing, to recognise genre, to become aware of their own use of language, to be precise in their argumentation, clearly

documenting support and evidence, elements that together make for a good academic essay. Martin favours such “front-loading”, the need to “make very clear to the students what the goals and objectives are and provide very good models of what you expect the students to be doing” (cited in Edwards 1999: 10). ARPs do precisely this, providing a clear model to follow, a model upon which to build, one placing great emphasis on the development of cognitive skill and doing so within an appropriate academic form.

There is much the authors have not been able to develop or include in this short piece. We would be very pleased to hear from teachers and provide copies of our more detailed article

mentioned here. Contact either <bayne@icu.ac.jp> or <fearn@icu.ac.jp>.

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