

# Writing for Scholarly Journals

Publishing in the Arts, Humanities and Social  
Sciences

Edited by

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## Chapter 2

# Turning your coursework into articles

*Alaric Hall*

Academic coursework is modelled on professional academic writing, and is designed to help students learn how to write professional academic articles.<sup>1</sup> But it can also be of professional standard in itself, or be developed after submission, and may prove your point of entry into academic publishing. My approach to this process here begins by addressing some practical questions about publishing coursework – about whether and where you should try to publish. I then proceed to look at the writing itself – at how writer-centred coursework differs from reader-centred articles and how professional-level writing is formatted, with a couple of hints about content. Just for brevity, I use a lot of imperatives, but I do not claim to be authoritative! Unless you turn out to be the next Jaques Derrida (in which case, I will be expecting the cheque in the post), no-one will ever know your work better than you; and you know your own aspirations and ambitions. Publishing is fundamentally about personal motivation, and you have, therefore, to make personal choices. Reading my aforementioned scribulations, you would find a lot of cases of ‘do as I say, not as I did’, but I seem to have managed.

### Who are you?

Although I would never turn a reader away, this document is aimed at people in the arts, humanities and social sciences turning coursework in the 5–30,000-word range into academic articles. I am also thinking primarily of students in Britain, so in case you are reading from elsewhere, here is some contextualisation. British degrees tend to be specialised, short and sometimes intensive by international standards, making them relatively conducive to producing publishable coursework. British students have a particular incentive to publish coursework: they emerge onto the job market

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<sup>1</sup> This article was much improved by the comments of a number of friends—some of whom were students still considering their first publication, some of whom were postgraduates already experienced in the matter. My thanks go accordingly to Fiona Barclay, Paul Sander Langeslag, Kate Maxwell, Daniel Soule, and Jukka Tyrkkö.

relatively early, into a university culture characterised by the Research Assessment Exercise, which demands that academics publish extensively, in respected peer-reviewed journals. Undergraduate dissertations tend to be around 10–12,000 words, with coursework on a taught Master's degree 5,000 and dissertations 15,000. A research Master's dissertation is normally about 30,000 words (though these are becoming less common, partly because their length does not correspond to any genre of professional academic writing).

## Motivations

### **Is my coursework worth publishing?**

Ultimately, this decision lies with the peer-reviewers of the journal(s) to which you submit your work. But generally speaking, the better a piece of coursework is, the more it will look like a professional article, so you can be guided by your marks and your supervisors. The piece will need to be focused and probably quite specialised – very wide-ranging scope is unlikely to produce new findings at an early stage in your research career.

In Britain, a mark over 70% is a good sign. That said, some supervisors are more encouraging than others; ambition and promise in coursework can please examiners, but will not in themselves convince peer-reviewers; conversely, simple but new observations (for example, demonstrating the influence of one text on another) may not exhibit the originality or breadth which examiners and leading journals want, but can afford a valuable contribution to a respectable journal.

### **Is it worth it for me?**

Probably the key motivating factor in academic publishing is the desire to share your ideas with others. I hate to leave new research on the shelf. But there are some more mercenary factors to consider:

Pros:

- Academia revolves around publishing, so it is good to prove that you can do it. Since you have put all that work in already, why not go an extra mile?

- If your later research (e.g. doctoral research) follows on from earlier (e.g. Master's-research) but cannot include it, it may be useful to publish it and cite it. Equally, if your Ph.D. takes a new direction, publishing earlier work can demonstrate your breadth.
- Academic publications can also look good in other fields. I have a friend who attributes his job as a bookshop manager to articles arising from his (never-completed) Ph.D. on contemporary fiction. Another one who does language-checking and copy-editing likes to show that she can produce professional-level academic English.

Cons:

- Potential academic employers may be more interested in your potential to publish than your track record. They may prefer to see a couple of important pieces in high-status journals than a larger quantity of minor research in mediocre ones – so it may be better to focus on your doctoral research.
- Employers may be suspicious of too much breadth in research, lest you spread yourself too thinly to make a major impact in a field.
- If your research produced experimental data which you are still mining, it may be prudent to keep it under wraps until you have finished.
- For postgraduates, time spent writing for publication is time away from research and thesis writing. You (and/or your department) may find it difficult to reconcile the development of old work with the swift production of your thesis.

I have heard postgrads (and occasionally more senior researchers) talking in terms of using publications to stake a claim to a particular field to discourage others from working on it. My impression is that this thinking reflects a time when humanities scholarship was seen to be about making objective discoveries rather than developing different readings of the evidence, and when people imagined that a subject could be

‘done’ by a single scholar. This time is, at least in the Anglo-American world, long past! Besides, I am sceptical as to whether the mechanism would work: unless you place your work in really widely-read journals, it will take four or five years for knowledge of it to filter out – and that does not count the time lag between writing and publication! Publishing original ideas swiftly obviously limits the chances of someone else stealing your thunder, and the sooner your work is published, the sooner you will start building yourself a reputation. But that is different from simply trying to ‘stake a claim’ – not least because it is about communicating valuable ideas rather than publishing for the sake of it.

I have also known people to fret about letting the world glimpse their juvenilia. Certainly as each of my first few articles emerged I reread them thinking ‘Arrrgh! What halfwit wrote this?!’ (Now I just try not to read them at all.) But if work is accepted by a respectable journal then it has passed the standard set by the profession, and since appointments committees are unlikely actually to have read your work, that is what is important. We all make the odd mistake or change our minds about interpretations – that is how we know we are moving forward. I have enjoyed coming back to some of my coursework-based articles years after writing them and thinking ‘Hey, that’s actually pretty useful’ and being able to say ‘Well, I was wrong about X, but by reinterpreting X we can now argue Y’.

The decision is yours—weigh up honestly your own desire to publish, whether you have something new to say, and how useful the time and effort will be to you. As usual in higher education, a lot comes down to whether you are prepared to give it a shot.

## Where should I submit my work?

### **Choosing a journal**

Aim for a well-established, respected journal, ideally one which scholars in your field routinely browse. You can spot candidates from your own research reading, but also by checking the publications lists of departments where you would like to work. Your supervisors can be particularly useful for inside information about which journals are, say, short of submissions in your area, or noted for slow turnaround. Be realistic about whether a given journal/editorial board (usually listed on the covers of the journal) will be sympathetic to your work: good journals may reject good work for reasons of ideology, thematic cohesion, or simply excessive length.

Another variable to consider is a journal's relationship with the Internet. It seems fairly clear that journals with an electronic incarnation are more widely read than print-only ones, and that articles in free-access online journals are liable to be more widely read again. You can also improve visibility by posting your articles on a website of your own or in an institutional repository (such as Glasgow's eprints: <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/>), and there are enough journals that accept this practice that I would advise you to avoid publishing anywhere which would prevent you from it (or try to charge you for the privilege). But however you negotiate these variables, be aware of the bottom line: although in the long run it may be important to be widely read, at an early stage in your career it is probably more important to have the names of widely recognised and well-respected journals on your CV.

Conference proceedings generally have lower status and (even) slower turnaround than journal issues. Journal editors usually have a reasonably steady flow of submissions, which arrive in a more or less finished state, so they can reject the poorer ones and move straight to publication with the good ones. But people getting a book together cannot usually be so choosy – they may not be able to reject poor work for fear that the collection will be too short, and will often have to wait while slow contributors get their act together. An invitation to contribute to conference proceedings might be the first hint that someone might want to publish your work, which may make you want to say 'yes please!' straight away. But they are best avoided.

### **Using the peer-review process**

Think about aiming high and, assuming you are rejected (which in this strategy you probably will be), revise your work and move a rung down the pecking order. (But stop before you reach the bottom!) When a journal rejects, and often when it accepts, your work, you will be sent the comments and suggestions of its peer-reviewers. These will probably sting – but they are often detailed and expert, and responding to them carefully can be invaluable in honing your work. You might then resubmit to the same journal (journals often invite this as a matter of courtesy), but I often think that it is healthy to make a fresh start with a different journal.

Of course, sometimes you do just get a review that is genuinely off the mark. Obviously, any negative review seems off the mark at first, so give yourself a few days to muse on it before responding. And even a bad review will have some useful

points, if only to show you where you could have been clearer. Beyond that, it may just be best to resign yourself to trying another journal (and hoping you do not get the same reviewer again – it does happen...). That said, on the one occasion when I really felt that a reviewer was barking up the wrong tree, I contacted the editor of the journal and asked (with great deference) if it would be possible to get him/her to clarify a couple of the more problematic points. In the event, the editor actually assigned another reviewer instead, who accepted the piece.

## How do articles differ from coursework?

I now move from the practicalities of turning coursework into articles to the mechanics of writing them. Broadly speaking, articles and good coursework have similar characteristics: thorough, precisely-referenced reading; clear and elegant writing; and original arguments. It is usually possible to write coursework as though you were writing an article, both raising your marks and making publication easier. But there are some potential differences to be aware of.

### **Writer-centred and reader-centred writing**

There are potentially two big, general differences between coursework-writing and article-writing:

- Coursework is **defensive** – it is about justifying yourself to examiners – whereas in articles your competence is assumed and your writing is focused on **laying out your argument**. Thus in coursework, you may have to show your understanding of key debates, theories or methodologies even when this does not advance your argument, but in articles, your grasp of these issues is assumed. You need instead to cut to the chase, mentioning wider issues as contextualisation, but using your references to direct the reader to appropriate surveys or key studies.
- Coursework is **writer-centred**: it is about learning your way round the discipline; how to research and write. Your supervisors and examiners are a captive audience: reading your work is their job. But articles have to be **reader-centred**. The first question you ask of an article is ‘can I be bothered to

read this?’ – and so does everyone else! You have to make the significance of your work immediately clear, and make it as easy to digest as possible.

### **The Coalface**

There was a time when ten-year-olds read *Great Expectations* for fun and when scholars sat ruminating over secondary literature. There was not too much of this, and personal authority was more important than now, so major writers could afford to provide sparse and cryptic references. They also produced some seminal work, so you may have read quite a lot of their stuff on undergraduate and Master’s courses. But times change: journals are the forum for new, coal-face research; your readers need to know the point of your article quickly, to skim your discussion for material which interests them, mine your references and move on.

Thinking in these terms may not be easy. Your first major research or first published article is important to you (and should be). It is natural to think of it as your masterpiece (which, literally speaking, it may well be), into which you must fit all your ideas. I think that the key here is to realise (even if it is only as a mind-trick) that your first publication will not be your last. It is more important that it is accepted for publication, read and cited, than that it is your complete set of ideas.

### **Length**

Journals’ word-limits are usually around 7,000 words, sometimes up to 10,000 (including footnotes etc.). Often they do not say this explicitly – you have to infer their preferences from what they publish. When you struggled to fit your thoughts into 15,000 words, or indeed 30,000, you may view these figures with dismay. Here are some solutions.

- Starting small. Although shorter pieces of, say, 5,000 words are seen in taught Master’s courses as practice runs for the dissertation, I found them easier to turn into articles. If you have a short piece focused on a strong, original argument or on new data, you might focus first on working that up.
- Crunching. Tightening up phrasing six months after finishing a bit of work will allow you to cut 10% quite easily. Beyond that, returning to a piece after a long break and pruning background material back to the references, you may see that the real meat is of a manageable size (the break might have to be a

couple of years though). Sometimes a long dissertation actually has quite a short core of new, primary argumentation.

- **Chopping.** This is my favourite, because it can increase the rate, quantity and readership of your publications all at once. If your dissertation is good but will not crunch, the key is to chop it up into several pieces. This is hard, because you will rightly perceive your arguments as an organic whole, each element dependent on the others. I was aghast to hear that the rule in physics is ‘one paper, one idea’. But the principle stands: journal publication is about putting your arguments into modular units, later ones referring to earlier ones. When you have not yet had one article published, it feels risky to be thinking about a series which might emerge over a couple of years; moreover, earlier pieces may have to be data-heavy and rather dull to lay the groundwork for more interesting conclusions in later (perhaps higher-status) publications. But you will have to get into the rhythm of this sooner or later.
- **Notes.** Some journals also publish short notes of 1,000–3,000 words. Notes are not very prestigious, but can be useful ways of repackaging small but significant observations that underlie your argument but would clutter up your article. They are also relatively quick and easy to write and publish.

### **Appearance**

‘We were sitting’, says a biography of the sociologist and historian Risto Alapuro, ‘complaining about academics who do 70% of the work and expect others to do the other 30%’ ([...], 2004, p.9). Imagine how an editor’s heart sinks when (s)he receives a good argument which would take hours of copy-editing to make presentable. You need to make their life easy.

### **Language and punctuation**

British university teachers generally concern themselves only with the content of students’ work. But despite this insouciance, to publish professionally you need to write correctly punctuated, formal English—and it is best to sort this out sooner rather than later. This includes putting apostrophes in the right place in possessives (*its*, *his* vs. *it’s*, *he’s*; *dogs vomit*, *dog’s vomit*, *dogs’ vomit* all mean different things) and

knowing how to use semi-colons. This is not just pedantry: appropriate punctuation allows a reader to analyse a sentence efficiently and to read more quickly. As always in language, there is variation (*Father Christmas's vomit* or *Father Christmas' vomit?*). But you need to be consistent and unambiguous (Quirk *et al*, 1985, esp. Appendix III).

If you are not a native speaker of English, then you will need to get your work checked by a native speaker who understands academic English. (At Helsinki, even the head of the English department does this, so no one is exempt.) Note that titles are the hardest but most important thing to get right – conventions of literary style apply as well as grammar – and are often badly done. There is a great study from Sweden called *Freyr's Offspring*, but no native speaker would have written the title (*The Children of Freyr* would be more likely). Language-checking can be expensive, so discussion with the editor before submission may be appropriate, but you will need it at some point.

## Style

By *style* I do not mean your personal style. This will develop with experience, and all that is really important is that you write clear, formal prose. *Style* refers to a given journal's formatting of references (footnotes or Harvard? Reduce first names to initials or reproduce as on title page?); layout (when do you inset a quotation? Do you indent the first line of the opening paragraph?); and punctuation (single quotation marks or double? 'pp. 12-15' with a hyphen or 'pp. 12–15' with an en-dash?). The esteemed history editor of an Anglo-Saxon studies journal was recently asked 'Why are no history articles ever published in your journal? Will you not let people disagree with you?' And he looked down sadly and wistfully replied, 'No – I'd publish anything if only the footnotes were formatted correctly'. In Britain at least, students often do not seem to learn how to do this – and in the hard sciences it seems not to matter, because there is money available to pay professionals to do the job – but for journal publication in the arts and humanities, you not only have to be rigorously consistent, but you must format your work in accordance with your target journal's style.

It is hard to learn academic style simply by observation. Some journals help by providing detailed notes, some will refer you to a published style guide. Whatever the case, reading a style guide is worth it. In Britain, the most common is the MHRA

Style Guide (available at <http://www.mhra.org.uk/>). This covers punctuation, formatting of dates, what information to include in references and where, and so on. Even if the journal to which you are submitting has a different style, reading a style guide will show you what to look out for and help you to divine other people's conventions.

Sometimes it is a bit hard to work out the details of a publication, especially if it is in a foreign language. It usually helps to check how it is handled in a good online bibliography or the catalogue of a reliable research library (the British Library is patchy; I usually use Cambridge University Library, available at <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk>).

### **Structure and signposting**

Writer-centred work tends to assume that the reader knows as much about the subject as the writer. Moreover, undergraduate reading material frequently assumes knowledge that you do not yet have: this may give you the impression that impenetrable writing is acceptable, or even a genre requirement. On the contrary, you need to write as simply and clearly as you can: complex arguments are hard enough to absorb without being badly expressed. Lead the reader by the hand.<sup>2</sup>

I am not the first person to tell you to say what you are going to say, say it, and then say it again. This always seemed depressingly clunky to me. I wanted my writing to reflect my own experience of discovery: to lay out my evidence and arguments until they all came together like the final, revelatory scene of a Poirot novel. For the reader, however, this is a bit like when someone drives you to a party in a part of town where you have never been and then says 'you did remember the way, didn't you?' So I promise that it is good advice: say what you are going to say, say it, and then say it again.

I also used to think that sub-headings were clunky (the classics of history-writing and literary criticism did not use them). But sub-headings are in vogue: they are one of the easiest ways to signpost your arguments and to help skimming readers. (If the style of the journal you are writing for allows it, then it is useful to number them: this makes it easier to cite specific sections while the article is still forthcoming and therefore unpaginated.)

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<sup>2</sup> Okay, I admit that some very famous and successful academics—Derrida springs to mind—do write wilfully impenetrable prose, as do many of their imitators. But do you really want students to find your writing as difficult as you find theirs?

## **Content**

Obviously, I cannot tell you what to write! A prerequisite for an academic article is generally, of course, that you have something new to say. This is not as simple a statement as it may sound: in some ways, having something new to say has more to do with rhetoric and structuring than with actual content. Just as elections tend to be lost rather than won, articles tend to be rejected for their faults rather than accepted for their merits. Imagine you are a peer-reviewer sent a very dull article which makes a thorough survey of past scholarship, with no new intellectual content of its own. If its title is ‘Twentieth-Century Educational Policy in the London Boroughs: A Survey of Scholarship’, and it opens by stating a need for consolidating the scholarship in the field, then you would hardly feel like you could reject it, because saying ‘It’s boring’ is not seen as a well-reasoned, intellectually acceptable explanation. If, on the other hand, you received the same article, but it was called ‘New Perspectives on Twentieth-Century Educational Policy in the London Boroughs’, you would no doubt write to the editor saying ‘This claims to offer new perspectives, but in fact it offers none’.

The problem that I have most often encountered in the content of articles based on coursework, then, is not that they have nothing new to say, but that authors have not succeeded in making their original contribution clear. They fail to state explicitly how their points move beyond the existing scholarship on a subject, and see summaries of existing knowledge as goals in themselves, rather than a means to show what is new in their own work. Often students begin their research with a particular aim or topic in mind, and do not realise that this original context is not actually the one in which their new insights make most sense. Be prepared to stand back from your work, evaluate what your new findings are, and to think about them on their own terms. In this way, even quite small insights can often be packaged as useful and marketable articles. This kind of thinking should also guide how you develop the content of your work as you turn your coursework into an article. If your original contribution is that you have a new survey of scholarship, you should make an extra push to ensure that your survey is complete. If your original contribution is that you noticed that all the heroes in a novel wear top hats and all the villains wear bowler hats, check whether this is the case in the author’s other works, or read more about the

cultural significance of different kinds of hats in the author's society: put the new material at the centre of your argument.

Beyond this fundamental point, here are a couple of pointers to including the useful, reader-centred content.

### **Helpful information**

While you can often cut coursework-style summaries of background material when turning coursework into articles, you do need to support your readers. Ensure that you allow informed readers who are not intimately acquainted with your topic to follow you without recourse to a dictionary or encyclopaedia. When was that dynasty again? What was the Chicago School? Will readers necessarily know what *logadoeic* means? As terminology can mean different things to different people, this also relates to the importance, which you probably heard enough about as an undergraduate, of defining your terms. Deciding what you can and cannot take for granted is tricky, but bear in mind the scope of your target journal. Readers of *Reformation Studies* will know when Luther nailed up his 95 theses, but readers of *The Journal of Religions* might appreciate a reminder.

Another useful exercise is to give versions of your article a few times as an oral paper. (But never just read out the draft! Oral communication works very differently from written.) If people keep saying 'But how do you see your work relating to gender?', maybe you need a paragraph on that, or a sentence or two which acknowledge the connection but explain why it falls outside the remit of your paper.

The 'be helpful' principle also applies to foreign-language quotations. There was a time when scholars might quote texts in French, German, Sanskrit, Old Irish and Hittite in an article on Latin literature without translating any. This is tempting, to save words and to avoid mistranslating. But (unless you are quoting, say, standard modern French in *Francophone Linguistics*) reader-centred articles must translate foreign-language quotations.

### **Your reading**

Good coursework and successful articles share the requirement of being thoroughly grounded in the relevant scholarship. Different scholars, disciplines and countries demand different degrees of bibliographic completism, but be clear that good journals will expect thorough reading and referencing, and with electronic bibliographies and

free resources like <http://www.scholar.google.com/> and [print.google.com](http://print.google.com), there is little excuse for ignorance. Work with serious omissions does get published, of course, in lower-standard journals, but you will know from experience how irritating it is to read articles which unwittingly focus on long-dead debates, use outdated editions of primary sources, or make an argument first propounded twenty years before. The traditional method of following up relevant-looking references in other articles remains important too of course. Also, if someone has written a particularly useful article, search to see if they have written others.

Standards for coursework and publications diverge mainly when your university library is ill-equipped in the relevant subject area, or (at least in monoglot academic cultures like Britain's) where secondary literature is not written in your native language(s). If you think you have been cut slack in your coursework reading, you will need to rectify this when preparing your work for publication. You would, of course, be forgiven for not reading an old unpublished thesis not held in your country, or an article about medieval English written in Japanese. But work written in major scholarly languages such as French or German should be on the menu.

Getting material may involve extensive use of inter-library loan services or a few days raiding a major copyright library like the British Library. With foreign-language material, you will need to learn to read major languages of scholarship on your subject, cajole competent friends into making summaries for you, or pay for translations. The grammar and vocabulary of Germanic and Romance languages is similar enough to English that English-speakers can usually get through an article after a week or so doing a teach-yourself language course and a couple of (admittedly painful) days of looking up the words in a dictionary (it is quickest to use a good online dictionary). It gets easier each time, and be assured that many have done it before you!

## In conclusion

The key factor, then, is you: do you want to give it a go? Once you have interesting (or at least publishably new) things to say, it is a question of saying them in a reader-centred way: as a clearly written, well-signposted and helpfully structured argument. Good luck!

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