

MASTER PROGRAMME PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES

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Do you still remember your very first scientific paper that you had to write during your time as a student? If yes, what was it about?

Yes, it took me the whole semester break and had the title "Der Bismarckmythos als politischer Mythos Ein Kampf um die Deutung der Vergangenheit".

How did you feel about scientific writing during the first years as a student?

It was (and still is) a pain and a pleasure at the same time. Dealing with interesting thoughts of others, developing my own thoughts and creating a text that I'm the author of all of this was thrilling and made me proud. Painful was to handle a lot of texts get lost in them, to forget what I wanted to say or to realize that it made no sense and to have to start all over again. I think I could have spared myself some pain, would I not have been so busy pretending that I already knew how to write.

How has that feeling changed nowadays (if it did)?

Unfortunately, I have less time for writing than I used to have as a student. But when I write, it's more fun, since I developed some routines and learned some helpful lessons (about writing and about my personal writing process) over the years.

What do you like most about scientific writing? What keeps you writing?

Academic writing (but this can be true for other forms of writing too, I guess) includes a process of gaining a better understanding of an object or a subject. I generally like reading academic texts if they deal with an interesting topic and are well written. However, writing myself is a way to make a subject my own by going through a process where I develop my own perspective on an aspect of that subject.

Which aspects of scientific writing are rather challenging or exhausting for you?

When I have an idea what I want to explore or an intuition what I want to say, I'm full of enthusiasm. But when I start writing I often realize that I cannot express what I thought I wanted to say or that I cannot formulate a proper question. Moreover, I do particularly like the phase of checking the coherence of the citation style used.

Are there any rituals that you follow when writing a scientific paper?

Although I think writing can and should be fun and that it is important to have a tidy workplace, no outside obstruction and go for coffee, I still find it helpful to occasionally outwit myself. One ritual for instance is, that I don't start with the coffee, but force myself to sit down and write for a few minutes first and then have the coffee afterwards. This helps, as only writing for a few minutes and then having a coffee seems like a fair deal, and it protects me from getting stuck in cleaning the whole flat instead of getting started. Quite often the "few minutes" become the two most productive writing hours of the day.

Are there any methods you use during your writing process that you want to recommend to your PACS students?

Yes. The first one I would like to answer with a quotation I found in the memoirs of the excellent writer Raymond Aron, where he reflects on his early writings: "Die meiste Zeit schrieb ich das einem bestimmten Autor gewidmete Kapitel, ohne mich auf die Texte zu beziehen, indem ich sein Denken auf der Basis der Ideen rekonstruierte, die ich seinen Büchern entnommen hatte. [Fußnoten fügte ich später hinzu." ["Most of the time, I wrote a chapter dedicated to a certain author, without even referring to his texts, by reconstructing his thinking on the basis of those ideas which I retrieved from his books."]) (Raymond Aron (1988) Erkenntnis und Verantwortung. Lebenserinnerungen. München: Piper Verlag, S. 95). This is one of the most valuable lessons I've learned since writing my first undergraduate paper: Don't collect thousands of direct and indirect quotations and then try to merge them into your own text! What I recommend instead, is to excerpt the (relevant) texts you read. Once you are done with this, put all the texts away and start writing a first draft of your paper. Only then go back to your excerpts (and if needed to the original texts), correct mistakes, work in passages, add quotations etc.

While writing on a text, keep a writing journal, a nice paper book where you write in with a pen. If you manage, write for 15 minutes every day (if possible in the morning, before you do anything else). Write down everything connected to your paper that is on your mind; e.g. "I feel that I got stuck. Perhaps this is because" or "If I got it right, what author xy really wants to say is" or "as I see it now, what I want to show in my paper is". I try to take my journal along with me whenever possible, because I may have a good idea that I would easily forget if I did not write it down immediately. So, the writing journal has at least two purposes: it helps you think (and by that overcome writing blockages as well) and it helps collecting ideas. Quite often I can use passages from my journal for the final paper.

Lastly, is there anything else that you would like to tell your students about scientific writing?

Don't be afraid to ask for feedback or exchange your thoughts or even rough drafts of your papers with others. Don't be afraid to ask for productive criticism. It's what the scientific method is all about. Finally: Read about writing! For instance, Joan Bolger (1998): Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day. New York: Holt Paperbacks.