

RENU GUPTA, *A Course in Academic Writing*, (2nd edition). Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2017, 196 pp., ₹330, ISBN: 978-93-86689-63-4 (Paperback).

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In the late 1970s, while addressing sociology students at Hindu College (University of Delhi), Professor M.N. Srinivas said that he knew of doctoral candidates (and the other researchers) who conducted pieces of good fieldwork, analysed data systematically and carefully, but were finally unable to submit their research for evaluation since they failed to write it cogently and persuasively. If they did, these works (dissertations, reports) were written so ‘shabbily’ that they were sent back

for revision or even rejected. Or, they were so ‘clumsy’, ‘terse’ and ‘unreadable’ that they were unable to create the impact that they would have done had they been written well.

Now, after reading Renu Gupta’s second edition of the paperback book, I am convinced that writing is indeed an onerous task. It does not come to us naturally, as perhaps speaking does, since it is an art to be meticulously cultivated. Our classrooms, the book tells us, do not equip us, ‘to write for professional reasons’ (p. ix). This ‘student-friendly’ book does not only tell us how to acquire writing skills, but also gives thoughtful exercises that if followed diligently, can enhance one’s writing ability and build confidence so that we would not be afraid of showing our written works to others for critical evaluation.

We all suffer in different degrees from what is popularly called ‘writer’s cramp’, a ‘disability’ that is consistently ignored, because of the presumption that we are unable to write since we have not read enough. As a consequence, most of our time is spent in libraries (now, surfing web resources), trailing the snowball process of one book leading to another. Because of endless reading, the final outcome of our research, which is a piece of written text, is inordinately delayed leading to a state where writing becomes a difficult, far-fetched goal. Gupta’s submission in all her writings, including this book, is to create awareness among readers that good writing skills can always be built up, provided we know that good reading skills do not always generate good writing (p. xiii). In fact, both reading and writing should be accorded equal attention; if reading familiarises us with new ideas and gives us thoughts to ponder, writing leads to an examination of our understanding and reflections. Our notions, viewpoints and thoughts get disciplined, straightened, clarified and focused as we write.

Comprising 14 chapters, the book takes care of different forms of academic writing, here divided into five (p. xiv), though they are not iron-clad categories, for example, ‘expository’ essays could be ‘persuasive’ as well, or ‘narratives’ could also be ‘descriptive’. Academic texts are classified in this book as argumentative—they ‘use facts and logic rather than opinion’ (p. xiv)—but this is a myopic way of viewing, for there is a whole range of academic writings, some of which is highly opinionated, and some, highly abstract and cogitative, some highly polemical. Neat and discrete classifications of academic and scholarly works are difficult to achieve because they cover a wide canvas, showing essentially their author-centered nature. Classifications invariably falter; the one given in this book is no exception.

Some sage advice given to all writers is that they should be prepared to revise drafts of their works—our ‘first draft’ is not our ‘final draft’ (p. xv). The possibility of improving upon one’s writing always exists; and this would also explain why some illustrious authors have denounced their earlier works which may still be considered as classics, since they thought that they were poorly written and ineptly argued. However, it has also been seen that with experience, one may reach a stage where the distinction between the ‘first draft’ and the ‘final’ collapses. In response to a question whether he has the ‘other drafts’ of his oft-quoted papers,

Clifford Geertz, the Princeton anthropologist, said that each of his articles was written only once—in actuality, there were no drafts. He further said that since he always tried to write well-crafted texts, written elegantly, thoughtfully and fairly slow, the need to write subsequent drafts of his articles was hardly felt. Here, it is expected of authors that they would give detailed accounts of their experiences of ‘writing up’ and the ways in which they overcame their writing glitches and eclipses. There is no dearth of fieldwork accounts and the reminiscences of data collection, but we hardly come across first-hand accounts of how texts were composed.

The book notices the distinction between different ‘types’ of language—simple and complex, informal and formal, and general and technical. Which style of writing an author adopts depends upon the community of readers he or she has in mind. Often, academic writings, because of the use of difficult language, complex and convoluted sentences, employing technical vocabulary, become almost ‘unpenetrable’ (p. 77), with the result that they are confined to a minority of readers. Defense of such pieces of writing is not out of place. However, with the exception of highly technical works in sciences and technology, which have a limited readership, in social sciences, the best writing is one that may be read across disciplines and also by laypersons who may find such writings educative and life-changing. The book argues for clarity in writing, vividness in empirical descriptions and the use of suitable words. An attempt to exhibit one’s scholarship by deliberately using ‘flowery language’, ‘archaic words and expressions’ and a ‘heap of jargon’ is self-defeating.

An engaging part of the book is concerned with the presentation of ideas in seminars and workshops. These days, most speakers come prepared with powerpoint presentations. The book warns against such a practice; the audience can read the slides for themselves (p. 142). They will also find it tedious and a sheer waste of their time. Our experience is that listeners all over the world expect from the speakers a display of their orality (‘the gift of the gab’) over a reading of the printed material. The powerpoint is expected to render the purpose of an illustration. Moreover, machines may jam, pen drives may get corrupted or other technical problems may jeopardise the entire exercise. Needless to say, we have come across highly embarrassing situations where lectures were cancelled because at the last moment technical appliances failed. Therefore, we should think carefully about how we would present our ideas in formal gatherings. An oral preparation is indispensable for we would be expected to answer a volley of questions on our presentation later.

Although the book can be read within a few hours, we require more time to grasp its nuances and complete the exercises given at the end of each chapter.

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