

CHAPTER 1

An Introduction

Leading Questions

- What do students need to write in academic settings?
- How do approaches to knowledge affect academic writing?
- What is “academic literacy”?
- Does academic writing vary across cultures?
- Does academic writing vary across disciplines?
- What kinds of ESL student could you expect to find in an academic writing class?

This chapter provides an overview of key issues in the teaching of academic writing. First, it considers what students need to write in different settings, be they university/college or secondary school settings. It then discusses approaches to knowledge and what this means for writing at different levels of study and in different educational settings. Next, the chapter discusses the notion of academic literacies and, in particular, the view that academic writing requires more than just “knowledge and skills.” The chapter continues with discussions of cross-cultural issues in writing in a second language and disciplinary differences in academic writing. The chapter concludes with indications for further reading.

Each chapter starts with a set of questions that introduces you to the main topics that will be discussed in the chapter. Chapters contain **Classroom Implications**, which discuss classroom implications of the topic that has just been discussed. **Tasks** for readers to carry out in relation to the topic discussed are also included, as are examples of **exercises** that illustrate the topic discussed. Each chapter ends with a section titled **Beliefs and Practices**, which invites you to consider your own beliefs and classroom practices in relation to the content of the chapter. Suggestions for further reading are provided.

..Writing in Academic Settings

A number of studies have investigated the kinds of texts that students need to write in academic settings. The research on this reveals a range of writing requirements across educational settings and programs of study and that what happens in one setting does not necessarily occur in another (Etherington, 2008; Leki, 2007). A large number of students are also enrolled in degree programs that require the writing of a thesis or dissertation in English. Research shows that graduate L2 students often have difficulty meeting the demands of the kind of writing required of them at this particular level (Casanave, 2002). They are also often uncertain of what is required of them in the writing they need to undertake in their studies. Tasks such as a “library research paper,” “position paper,” and “response to readings” (Casanave, 2002) may be clear to the teacher, but may not be at all clear to a student who has never written this kind of text before.

In the appendix to his book on English for academic purposes, Jordan (1997) provides extracts from a number of popular books that have been written for teaching academic writing. Some of these books focus on organizational structures such as classification and cause-and-effect type texts; while others focus on writing texts such as research reports and academic essays. Other books combine a focus on the writing process with the content and organization of student texts and address issues such as narrowing a topic, focusing on main ideas, writing drafts, proofreading, and editing. While each of these aspects of academic writing is important, each needs to be placed within the context of what students actually need to write. The research shows that students often have quite different writing needs, depending on the level of study and area of study they are working in or wish to study in (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Hale et al., 1996; Johns, 1997).

Classroom Implications

A helpful way of investigating what students need to write is through an analysis of the writing tasks that are required of students in their particular courses of study as well as through the use of surveys and interviews with the students’ teachers. Horowitz’s (1986a) investigation of what university professors require students to write, and Zhu’s (2004a, 2004b) analysis of student writing assignments are examples of this. Horowitz (1986a) carried out his study by looking at writing assignment guidelines and examination questions. He obtained these by writing to professors, asking for copies of tests that required students to write both short and long answer responses. He also asked for copies of handouts given to students that describe the writing tasks students were required to complete. Zhu (2004a) examined business course syllabi and handouts and samples of students’ written texts and interviewed

university professors. These kinds of examinations are important, as research has shown that even something as seemingly simple as “the academic essay” varies from subject to subject and level of study, and that there is no such thing as the “one size fits all” academic essay.

TASK 1

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What are the most common writing tasks your students need to perform? Ask them to bring copies of their assignments to class. You could also interview the students’ teachers, and ask them what kinds of texts their students need to write. Alternatively, send out a written survey to the students’ teachers to ask them about their writing requirements. Ask them to send you copies of their course descriptions and the handouts they give to students that describe the writing tasks they require of them. Put this information together, and summarize the kinds of texts your students are required to write.

TASK 2

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Ask your students to make a list of the different kinds of writing they need to do in their studies. Ask them to make a list of things they find difficult about this writing and bring it to class to discuss with you.

...Approaches to Knowledge and Writing in Academic Settings

In their book *Teaching International Students* Ballard and Clanchy (1997) discuss attitudes to knowledge and approaches to teaching and learning at different levels of study, including how these change as students progress in their studies. This has important implications for the teaching of academic writing. For example, the primary focus in secondary school education is often “conserving” knowledge whereas as a student continues on to university, a shift to critiquing and extending knowledge occurs. This may include a shift from a focus on correctness (form), to simple originality and, then, to creative originality and the creation of new knowledge. Students, thus, often move from summarizing and describing information to questioning, judging, and recombining information, to a deliberate search for new

ideas, data, and explanations in their academic writing. Higher levels of study still expect correctness and the synthesis of information, however. At the same time, they also often expect the creation of new knowledge and a search for new evidence and interpretations.

Table 1.1 presents relationships between teaching and learning strategies and attitudes to knowledge at different levels of study. Ballard and Clanchy (1997) point out that the attitudes and strategies they describe are not fixed and static, but on a continuum. In all courses, students vary in the strategies and attitudes to knowledge that they adopt in their studies and in the writing that they produce. Equally, the learning strategies students adopt vary in relation to the different learning tasks they are undertaking. Notwithstanding, English educational institutions often share a dominant set of attitudes towards knowledge and learning strategies that are not immediately apparent to second language students, yet have important implications for their writing.

Classroom Implications

These different attitudes to knowledge and approaches to learning have an important impact on what students write and how they place themselves in relation to what they write. In an article titled “I thought I could write until I came here,” Mary Lea (1994) points out how students often have difficulty working out the “rules of the game” of academic writing. Students from a second language background may not realize that there are often different expectations for this kind of writing in English that may be quite different from where they came from. For example, in some countries the role of a teacher may be to provide students with all the knowledge they need to complete their written assignments. In English university settings, the role of the teacher is more likely to provide direction on materials to read and resources to explore, rather than to actually provide students with the materials they need for their writing. Students who write essays merely telling their professor what he or she has just told them may not do very well in an English-medium academic setting, but they may do very well in an academic setting in another country.

At a more advanced level, a teacher in an English-medium academic setting will want to know what students think about a topic, rather than wanting them to just re-state facts. The teacher may want students to critique what they read rather than simply reproduce and admire what the reading material has said. This is quite a culturally different position for many L2 students. This is especially the case for students who come from a culture where a teacher is the respected source of all knowledge and someone that should not be questioned or critiqued.

TABLE 1.1
 Attitudes to Knowledge, Approaches to Learning, and Different Levels of Study
 (adapted from Ballard & Clanchy, 1997, p. 12)

Attitudes to Knowledge	Conserving Knowledge		Critiquing Knowledge	Extending Knowledge
Learning Approaches	Reproductive		Analytical	Speculative
Teaching Strategies	Role of the teacher	almost exclusive source of knowledge; direction/guidance; assessment	the coordinator of learning resources; questioner, critical guide, gadfly; principal source of assessment	more experienced colleague and collaborator; preliminary critic and advisor; patron
	Characteristic activities	transmission of information and demonstration of skills; overt moral and social training	analysis of information and ideas within interpretive frameworks; modeling of demand for critical approach to knowledge and conventions	discussion/advice on ideas and methods on individual basis; modeling of hypothetical and creative thinking
	Assessment	tests of memory; recall and practical demonstration of skills; emphasis on replication; geared to ranking	assignment/exams requiring critical analysis and problem solving; emphasis on originality, quality of interpretation	independent research; thesis and papers of publishable quality; contribution to field of knowledge interpretation
	Aim	simple transfer of knowledge and skills	independent and critical styles of thinking; development of capacity for theory and abstraction	development of speculative, critical intelligence; expansion of knowledge base (theory, data, techniques)
Learning Strategies	Type of activities	memorization and imitation; summarizing, describing, identifying, and applying formulae and information	analytical and critical thinking; questioning, judging, and recombining ideas and information into an argument	speculating and hypothesizing; research design, implementation and reporting; deliberate search for new ideas data, explanations
	Characteristic questions	what?	why? how? how valid? how important?	what if?
	Aim	correctness	simple originality, reshaping material into a different pattern	creative originality, totally new approach/new knowledge

TASK 3

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Show a group of students Table 1.1 on page 5, and ask them to discuss the parts of the table that apply most to the pieces of writing they are currently working on. Ask them to discuss how the different attitudes to knowledge and approaches to learning affect what they write and how they write it. Then ask them to compare in what ways this is similar, or different, to how they would do a similar piece of writing in their first language and culture.

...Academic Literacies and Academic Writing

There are different views on what the acquisition of academic literacy involves. Some would see academic literacy as being made up of a set of skills that need to be acquired and that can then be transferred from context to context. Another view sees the development of academic literacy as a process through which teachers explain academic culture to their students so they can learn its requirements through a kind of apprenticeship. Here, there is the assumption that in school or college there is one culture whose norms and practices simply have to be learned in order to have access to the institution.

An academic literacies approach, in the plural sense, views student writing and learning at the level of epistemology and identities rather than as the acquisition of skills or socialization into the academy. It sees learning to write in academic settings as learning to acquire a repertoire of linguistic practices that are based on complex sets of discourses, identities, and values (Lea & Street, 1998). Here, students learn to switch practices between one setting and another, learning to understand, as they go, why they are doing this, and what each position implies.

One of the aims of education is the acquisition of a range of different literacies. This includes a wide range of written genres such as essays and assignments, literature reviews, examination responses, reflection papers, portfolios of written work, research projects, and case study reports. In some areas of study (such as business and communication), the range of genres is even greater. Students may do less writing in some disciplines than in others; the same is true about group writing, as opposed to writing on their own (Leki, 2007). This situation is further complicated by different areas of study, and the teachers within them, having different ideas of what a text, such as an essay or a report, should look like and what it should say (Johns, 1997).

Clearly, then, the teaching of academic writing needs to focus on more than just language-related issues. To effectively produce a piece of writing, students also need knowledge of the culture, circumstances, purposes, and motives that prevail in particular academic settings (Johns, 1997). This includes an understanding of the par-

ticular contexts in which the writing takes place. While a good level of language proficiency is clearly necessary, it is not, however, sufficient for students to succeed in academic settings. Previous research into academic literacies has shown that even native speaking students are not always aware of the university's or their department's expectations of them (Lea, 1994; Lea & Street, 1999). But clearly, this is even more difficult for students who have come from a context where the conventions and expectations of academic writing may be quite different from the situation they now find themselves in.

Classroom Implications

As Lea points out:

Each discipline and each subject within each discipline has specific ways of ordering and presenting knowledge. What is regarded as appropriate in one subject may be regarded as inappropriate in another. (Lea, 1994, p. 218)

An academic literacies perspective aims to help students work out what is appropriate and important in particular areas of study and why. Students are encouraged to explore underlying assumptions about what is regarded as “legitimate and valid knowledge” in particular areas of study (Lea & Street, 1998) and how this knowledge should be presented. Students still need technical writing skills, as well as an understanding of what an academic discourse community is and what it might expect of them. They also require, however, an understanding of how and why things are done and how things are valued in the particular area of study in which they are writing.

TASK 4

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What does *academic literacy* mean to you? List the skills you think are involved in being able to write academic texts. Then make a list of the aspects of “academic culture” you think students need to understand in order to write in academic settings. What are examples of “discourses, identities and values” that students need to understand in order to succeed in academic settings?

TASK 5

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Ask students what skills they think are most important for academic writing. What else do they think is important in order to be a successful academic writer?

---Cross-Cultural Issues in Academic Writing

The area of research known as **contrastive rhetoric** compares genres in different languages and cultures. Many studies in this area have focused on academic writing. Contrastive rhetoric has its origins in the work of Kaplan (1966), who examined different patterns in the academic essays of students from a number of different languages and cultures. Although Kaplan has since revised his strong claim that differences in academic writing are the result of culturally different ways of thinking, many studies have found important differences in the ways in which academic texts are written in different languages and cultures. Other studies (Kirkpatrick, 1995; Kubota, 1998; Mohan & Lo, 1985), however, have found important similarities in academic writing across cultures. Kubota (1992), for example, argues that just as Japanese expository writing has more than one rhetorical style, so does English, and that it is misleading to try to reduce rhetorical styles to one single norm.

Leki (1997) points out that while L2 students may often be taught to write in a standard rhetorical way, professional writers do not necessarily write this way in English. She argues that many stylistic and rhetorical devices that are said to be typical of Chinese, Japanese, and Thai writing, for example, also occur in certain contexts in English. Equally, features that are said to be typical of English writing appear on occasion in other languages as well. Contrastive rhetoric, she argues, can most usefully be seen, not as the study of culture-specific thought patterns, but as the study of “the differences or preferences in the pragmatic and strategic choices that writers make in response to external demands and cultural histories” (Leki, 1997, p. 244).

Classroom Implications

Kubota and Lehner (2004) argue that contrastive rhetoric often takes a deficit view of students’ second language academic writing. They also argue that much contrastive rhetoric research presents differences in academic writing that do not always exist. An example of this is the view of Chinese academic writing being circular and indirect and English academic writing being linear and direct, which, as Kubota and Lehner (2004) argue, is by no means always the case.

Other times, a writing advisor may look at a student’s family name and make assumptions about the writing on the basis of this, without knowing if they are indeed of that language and culture background. An example of this is an Australian student with a Chinese husband who was given advice on the circular nature of Oriental writing and the need to be more Western in her writing on the basis of her (Chinese) family name. In this case, the advisor pre-judged the student’s writing and made assumptions about it solely on his preconceived ideas about Chinese and English academic writing and the student’s ethnicity (Pennycook, 2001).

It is important, then, not to apply stereotypes regarding how students from one culture will write in another. There may be substantial differences, and there may not. It is not always easy to predict what these differences may be. One way of determining this is to ask students if they have written the same kind of text in their first language and in what ways that text was similar or different to the one they are now writing in English. Prince (2000) did this in a study in which she asked Polish and Chinese students who had already written a dissertation in their first language how similar or different they found this kind of writing in English. She found that, although the students had all written a dissertation in their first language, they had little idea of how they should do this in English. She also found that different students had different views on how they wanted to represent themselves in their English texts, which affected what they wrote and how they wrote it.

TASK 6

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Ask students to discuss how they typically write an essay in their first language and culture. Then ask them to compare this to their understanding of how essays are typically written in English. Is there one set way of writing an essay in their first language and culture? How does this compare with essays written in English?

---Disciplinary Differences in Academic Writing

The issue of disciplinary differences in academic writing has been widely discussed in the research literature. Prior's (1998) work reveals that learning to write in particular disciplines is very much a case of ongoing negotiation between students and their professors, mentors, and peers, rather than just a case of learning the language and culture of the academy. Zamel and Spack, equally, argue that "it is no longer possible to assume that there is one type of literacy in the academy" (1998, p. ix) and that there is one culture in the university whose norms and practices simply have to be learned in order for our students to have access to our institutions.

Classroom Implications

The teaching of academic writing has often assumed that what applies in one area will most likely apply in another. Many academic writing books teach generalizable skills and particular writing patterns that students are expected to transfer to whatever

piece of writing that they do. Some books focus solely on the academic essay when, in fact, some students may not have to write a traditional academic essay in their area of study, at all (Leki, 2007). In her book *Text, Role, and Context*, Johns (1997) argues that we cannot hope to predict all of the kinds of writing our students will have to do. We can, however, help our students to ask questions about the texts they are required to write, regarding what they are expected to address in their pieces of writing, and how they are expected to do this.

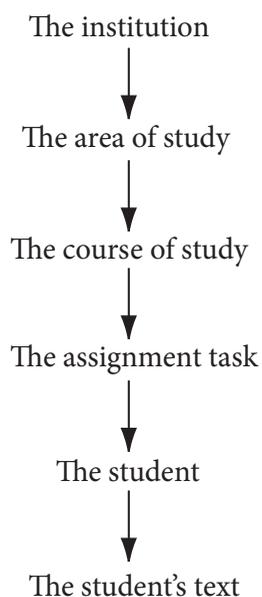
Figure 1.1 illustrates the relationship between a student's texts, the course of study, the academic discipline in which he or she is writing, and the institution in which the student is studying. Each of these has an influence on the form and content of the writing that students are required to produce and needs to be considered in the teaching of academic writing.

...Discourse Communities and Academic Writing

A key notion in the teaching of academic writing is the concept of **discourse community**. The notion of discourse community first appeared in composition studies during the early 1980s as a way of referring to groups of people in academic contexts whose beliefs and values shape different "types of communicative activities, including written genres" (Hyon, 1995, p. 24). People have different degrees of membership of

FIGURE 1.1

Text and Context in Academic Writing (based on Samraj, 2002)



discourse communities. That is, discourse communities may consist of close-knit networks of members, such as writers of poetry and their readers, or loose-knit groups of members such as advertising producers and consumers (Bex, 1995). Discourse communities may also be made up of several overlapping groups of people (Barton, 1994). Further, people may be members of more than one discourse community.

Discourse communities also interact with wider **speech communities**. For example, academic discourse communities also interact with the wider speech community of the town or city in which the academic institution is located (Swales, 1993). Grabe and Kaplan (1996) argue for the importance of the notion of discourse community in the teaching of second language writing. For the academic writing teacher, attention to the concept of discourse community provides a context in which teachers can focus not only on form, but also on content, social context, and the audience of a text. It also means, for the academic writing teacher, that students' work becomes more purposeful as students are initiated into the discourse community they wish to become part of. Bizzell (1992) has asked how a person becomes initiated into and accepted in a discourse community. Freedman (1989) suggests that this happens collaboratively. In her view, teachers, teaching assistants, and professors all play a part in the "initiation rite" of becoming part of the new discourse community. As Macbeth (2006) points out, "insiders" of a discourse community often take for granted their assumptions about what makes a good piece of academic writing. Most students, however, are not insiders. Indeed, those who arrive at college without prior familiarity with the kinds of writing that will be expected of them are usually those who struggle the most (Macbeth, 2006).

Classroom Implications

The notion of discourse community has important implications for the teaching of academic writing. It is not, however, as straightforward a concept as it might seem. In his book *Other Floors, Other Voices*, Swales (1998) shows this very well. Swales carried out a study in the building he was working in at the University of Michigan. He worked on the top floor of a small university building. The other floors were occupied by the computing resource site and a herbarium. He looked at the kinds of activities people on each floor were engaged in and the kinds of texts they wrote. He also interviewed a number of writers from the building to get an understanding of why they wrote the kinds of texts they did. He found that people on each floor wrote quite different texts, even though they worked in the same academic institution, the University of Michigan. He also found the writers' professional and academic histories had an important impact on what they wrote and how they wrote it.

This tells us that there is not just the one single discourse community in academic institutions that students have to learn about or write for. It also tells us that there

may be quite different ways of doing things in parts of an institution which are physically very close to each other. Also, different writers within the same part of an academic discourse community may have their own particular preferences for ways of doing things, which, if they are important or influential in their particular setting, may influence how other people write as well. It is useful, then, for students to think about the notion of discourse community and how it influences how and what they write.

TASK 7

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Ask students to make a list of the discourse communities they are members of. Is there any overlap between these discourse communities? What are some typical characteristics of their academic discourse community/ies? For example, who are typical members of the discourse community? How do people typically communicate with each other in these communities? Do they have their own ways of talking about things and specialized vocabulary that they typically use?

---Generation 1.5 Students and Academic Writing Classrooms

Student populations, in both schools and colleges, have changed in recent years, especially with what Harklau, Losey, and Siegal (1999) and others have called Generation 1.5 students. These are students who have had the majority of their education in English but for whom English is not their native language. These students often graduate from secondary school and enter university while they are still, in some ways, in the process of learning English. This includes migrant students and local residents born abroad, as well as indigenous language minority students, who are becoming a major constituency in university programs across the world. These students have characteristics and needs that are different from those of international students and different from those of students who are native speakers. Some of these students may give the appearance of being native speakers but in many ways are not (Reid, 1997; Harklau et al., 1999; Harklau, 2003).

Gravener (2007) provides this list of characteristics that are typical of many Generation 1.5 students:

- They speak two or more languages fluently.
- They have often learned English through listening and speaking and not through reading and writing.
- Their spoken language is fluent, and they often sound like native English speakers.
- They have never acquired or are losing literacy in their home language.

As Gravener points out, Generation 1.5 students are not easy to define, as they fall into a broad range of students. Some of these students will have immigrated while they are in primary or secondary school. Some may be children of wealthy families resident overseas who are living with relatives in the English-speaking country while they go to college. Most typically, however, they were born in the English-speaking country or came to that country very early in their lives but grew up speaking a language other than English at home. That is, they are often educated in English but do not have English as their home language.

Classroom Implications

Harklau (2003) has discussed issues in the teaching of Generation 1.5 students; one of these is the difficulty of knowing where to place them in writing classes when their literacy abilities are often more developed in English than in their native language and when their speaking skills are more advanced than their writing skills. She also discusses the difficulty of testing these students. Writing tests that are used with other student groups may be less useful with these students. There is also the question as to what extent Generation 1.5 students are, or are not, native speakers of English. As Harklau points out, the question of who is and who is not a native speaker of English is indeed a vexed one. So where should these students be placed, in mainstream composition classrooms or in ESL writing classes? Generation 1.5 students extend (and complicate) the notion of what it means to be an English language learner in school and in college settings (Benesch, 2007; Harklau, 1994, 2000).

TASK 8

Are you familiar with students that fit with Harklau's description of Generation 1.5 students? To what extent are they like native speakers of English and to what extent are they not? What implications does this have for teaching academic writing to these students?

This chapter has provided an overview of key issues in the teaching of academic writing that will be taken up in greater detail later in the book. This chapter has pointed out that what students need to write may vary considerably across academic departments, academic disciplines, and academic programs. It has also discussed how approaches to knowledge change across levels of study and how these impact what students need to write. It has touched on cultural differences in academic writing, a topic that will be continued in more detail later. The chapter has introduced the notion of discourse community as a way of focusing on the particular context in which students need to write.

The questions that follow ask you to consider the topics that have been introduced in relation to your own beliefs about academic writing as well as consider how the issues that have been discussed relate to what you do in the classroom.

---Beliefs and Practices

Beliefs

1. Do you think an academic writing course needs to be based on the kinds of texts students have to write in their areas of study? Or do you believe it can be based upon learning to write the academic essay?
2. To what extent do you think students can be taught generalizable skills that they can transfer from writing task to writing task?
3. Do you see English academic writing as the norm that all second language writers need to accommodate to?
4. Writers such as Santos (2001) argue that it is the responsibility of academic writing teachers to help second language writers assimilate dominant academic discourses. She argues that it is unethical not to do so. What is your view of this?
5. Do you think it is important, or possible, to deal with disciplinary differences in academic writing classes? Why or why not?

Practices

1. How could you go about carrying out an analysis of the kinds of writing your students need to be able to produce?
2. How could you draw on what students know about academic writing in their first language and culture in your academic writing classroom?
3. How could you use Table 1.1 (page 5) in your classroom?
4. How can you find out what is important in the texts that your students need to write, and how could you focus on this in your classroom?
5. How could you address disciplinary differences in an academic writing classroom, especially if you have students in the class writing, or preparing to write, in different areas of study?
6. What would you do differently if you had a classroom of Generation 1.5 students?

---Further Reading

Casanave, C. P. (2004). *Controversies in second language writing: Dilemmas and decisions in research and instruction*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

This is both a comprehensive and accessible review of issues and controversies in the teaching of second language writing. Topics covered include cross-cultural issues in second language writing, ways of improving student writing, writing for particular audiences, plagiarism, assessing student writing, and the politics of academic writing.

Ferris, D., & Hedgcock, J. (2005). *Teaching ESL composition: Purposes, process, and practice* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. Chapter 1, Introduction: Theoretical and practical issues in ESL writing.

In this chapter, Ferris and Hedgcock outline a number of key theoretical and practical issues in the teaching of second language writing, discussing, in particular, the uniqueness of second language writers and key differences between native English speaking and second language writers.

Hinkel, E. (2004). *Teaching academic ESL writing: Practical techniques in vocabulary and grammar*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. Chapter 2, Student writing tasks and written academic genres.

Hinkel discusses writing requirements in universities as well as common academic assignments and tasks that students need to complete. She describes essential features of these texts as well as the importance of teaching these features to student writers.

Hyland, K. (2002). *Teaching and researching writing*. London: Longman. Chapter 2, Key issues in writing.

This chapter of Hyland's book discusses issues in writing such as differences between speech and writing, ways in which writers express their relationship with their readers, as well as the fundamental question, what is an expert writer?

Hyland, K. (2006). *English for academic purposes: An advanced resource book*. London: Routledge.

This is a collection of resources for teachers and researchers wanting to learn more about theories and issues in the teaching of English for academic purposes. It contains important articles on the topic as well as practical exercises that focus on each of the topics in turn. Themes covered in the book include conceptions and controversies in teaching English for academic purposes, literacies and practices in teaching academic writing, and the design and delivery of English for academic purposes programs.