

Academic Writing in the Arts the Mumford Way

Stephen Mumford (@SDMumford)

1. Why a writing method?

I don't claim to be a brilliant academic writer. But I am productive. I get things finished and to deadline. This has been possible only because I found a way of writing. It may not be for everyone but could be of use to those who finds academic writing a stressful, or difficult or labour-intensive process.

The method is designed to be efficient: to minimize the time spent writing a paper and also to reduce the amount of discarded material that gets left to rot.

It is designed to be efficient in a second sense: to ensure that the paper includes all the points, arguments and evidence you want it to include and that the material is structured in the best way.

I'm a philosopher but I don't see why this method couldn't be used for any Arts or Social Science subject: anything that is essay based. Academic writing in the hard sciences may be a bit different so some of the method may not apply there.

2. What if you don't have a method?

Earlier in my career, I used to simply start writing on a topic and see where it would lead. I often had no idea, when I began, where I would end and what my conclusions would be. I wanted simply to follow the argument.

I thought this a valuable process. I would discover new things and finish with a conclusion that surprised even the author, me. It felt genuine and authentic rather than contrived. Writing was a process of discovery.

Like a number of new academic writers, I thought that I could only think on the page: as I wrote. Only when deep in such concentration did I really understand the issues, I believed.

However, the drafts produced were almost always entirely useless. The start of the paper didn't match up with the end, which is not surprising since the end was informed by a realization that occurred during writing.

And it was virtually impossible to tinker with the draft I had. The order of the paragraphs and all their connecting phrases was dictated by the line of reasoning, which was all work-in-progress.

So my next step was to produce another complete draft from the start. And then I was again thinking on the page, pursuing the thought wherever it led me, sometimes chasing rabbits down holes. I was simply repeating what I now take to be a flawed process.

I still have early (handwritten) multiple drafts of some of my first papers. One paper I drafted about five times. That was a lot of time spent in a rather unpleasant process of writing. And I still think there are places in the finished version where it doesn't hang together.

I often say to students when advising them on writing their essays that they should know their conclusion before they start writing and preferably they should state it at the very start of the essay as well as at the end. To do that, you have to know exactly where you are going right from the start.

Finding this whole process painful, I thought I needed to do something completely and radically different. The method – what my friends have called the Mumford method – evolved over a year or so but I found it incredibly useful once it was up and running. I have used it ever since. It's a method of *think slow; write fast!*

The method is based on a separation of the thinking and the argument from the writing process. I will now describe that method.

3. The abstract

First: the thinking. I find it helps to note my thoughts down quickly and in a way that I don't have to worry about style or, at least to begin with, structure. *Less than full prose; more than bullet points!*

I want to be able to see all the points I have and then think later about organizing them. I use a small font and find it looks much better if I divide the page into two columns, looking exactly like the document you are now reading.

I write down the points as briefly as possible. I just want to have them stated so that I can see what I believe, what follows from what, what connects with what, and so on.

Once I have some ideas down, I can start to see how they might form a structure because of their interconnections. As the material grows, I can introduce sub-headings that make the structure clear.

4. The handout

My abstract, I found, can also double as a very useful handout. It contains all the main points of a lecture such that the student or audience member need take no notes and can concentrate just on understanding what is said. It helps them and that helps me: I get better questions at the end.

My abstract is thus also my lecture handout and I find it works really well. I can keep eye-contact with my audience throughout because they aren't scribbling away writing things down. And the whole argument is there for me as well. I can lecture from the handout and need no additional notes. I just turn up with a bunch of handouts and retain one for myself before passing them round.

It is best to keep the handout to two sides, which can then be printed back-to-back on a single sheet of paper. Someone calls this a Mumford sheet. Occasionally the argument gets so detailed and involved that it has to go over on to more sheets but I try to avoid this.

Don't forget to include your email address or twitter name on the handout so that people can contact you later if a new objection or point occurs to them.

5. The feedback

Here we get to an essential of the Mumford method. It relies on time for reflection and feedback so that the handout can go through multiple drafts.

I like to present a 'paper' many times. This forces me to think and re-think the point but it also means I get lots of new ideas from the subsequent discussion.

I can incorporate new points in the next version of the handout for next time it is presented. For example, when arguing that causes don't necessitate their effects, we (it was a co-authored and co-presented paper – more about that later) got lots of objections from our audiences. We were able to go away, discuss and think about them, and come up with good replies. These were incorporated in the next version of the handout.

6. The redrafting

The handout can then grow organically as your thinking matures. In one case (my 'Negative Truth and Falsehood' paper), I presented the material about 15-20 times over two years and in five Continents, changing it all the time. By the end, I was very confident that I had thought it through and had accommodated all the major objections (OK, I must still have missed something but that's the Arts for you: there's no such thing as perfect paper but there are perfectly on-time papers).

The handout contains the whole structure in a small space. The structure is visible at a glance or two. And it is then very easy to move it around by cutting and pasting, trying out a new ordering of your thoughts, for instance. It's very easy to change the structure.

I am very lucky in that I get lots of invitations to speak. But the feedback can come from any source. If you're a graduate student, for instance, you can become involved in postgraduate seminars. Or you can circulate the handout and ask for comments.

You are more likely to get comments on a brief skeleton of your paper, which shouldn't take too long to read, than if you present someone with a 30-page complete draft. A reader can see what you are about very quickly and tell you whether they think you have a viable position.

7. Writing

Only when I'm confident that a paper feels ready do I write it up. And because all the thinking has been done, I need produce only one draft. Of course I have to read through it for typos, grammar and minor solecisms but it remains pretty much as per first draft. I never discard a paper once it's been drafted.

When I write, I can concentrate on presentation and style. I am not engaged in the agonizing struggle of thinking through difficult thoughts at the same time as trying to produce a clear statement

of them. Those two processes are very hard to combine. How can you produce a clear and simple statement of something with which you are yourself wrestling?

People often comment that my writing is clear and that I make difficult issues seem simple. This is the reason. I've done all my struggling with the material before I try to present it. I know exactly what I should say before I start writing.

Some comment that they don't know what they want to say until they start writing. But this cannot quite be right. It's not as if you begin by thinking you are writing on Kant's ethical theory and end up with a paper on the sociological insights of Charles Dickens. We all, to some degree, must plan what we want to say first. The Mumford method is simply to make that planning as thorough and robust as possible and make an even clearer distinction between the arguments and their presentation.

8. Books

I have presented this in terms of writing a paper. It hardly needs saying that there is no reason why a whole book or a PhD thesis could not be written this way. Write a handout for each chapter and keep it ongoing over a long period of time, constantly reviewing the structure of the individual chapters but also the whole.

I enjoy writing books. I like the challenge of dealing with the parallel problems of a lot of detail and a big picture. The method will allow the author to keep an eye on both. For your ten chapters, you may just have ten sheets of paper with the argument of the whole book. You can shuffle them round and then shuffle round the arguments within each chapter.

9. Co-authoring

A recent discovery is that this method suits co-authoring exceptionally well. The big challenge of co-authoring is agreeing to something you both or all believe. If you start with a handout then you can discuss the argument at length and make sure you agree before any writing begins.

I co-authored a whole book and several papers this way. We spent a lot of time in discussion, produced handouts, discussed them, presented them, revised them, and so on. When we were happy that we were ready, the full draft could be produced. It didn't matter which co-author produced the draft (we shared out those responsibilities). There were no nasty surprises for the other author when they received the draft.

10. If you like it ...

If the Mumford method appeals to you, please go ahead and try it and let me know what you think. I have purposefully made this document available in Word so that you can download it and overwrite it with your own material while preserving the format. I would feel very pleased if I saw others using my format.

If there are any useful suggestions, I can redraft this document on an on-going basis. That's the Mumford method!