

## Developing a composition textbook and course for the Australian context

Winifred Belmont  
First Year Advisor

(Arts, Humanities, Behavioural Cognitive and Social Sciences)  
University of New England, Armidale, NSW

In the early 1990s, the University of New England, Armidale introduced a course in formal academic writing for first year students in response to the perceived needs of our students. As a regional university, and one that has a large number of Distance Education students, our students tend to be from more diverse backgrounds than students at metropolitan universities. We also have special arrangements for students from the region who, although they may not achieve the specified UAI, are given entrance on the basis of principal's recommendation. In addition, we have other modes of entry that allow mature students to enroll even if they may not have completed high school. As a result, many of our students have not had to write formal essays before, and we would be acting in bad faith if we just ignored this fact.

At first, because there was no comparable Australian textbook, American composition textbooks were used, but these were never fully satisfactory. Quite apart from the differences in spelling and usage, some chapters dealt with aspects of the language that most of our students do not have trouble with (e.g. the forms of the verbs 'to be', 'to do' and 'to have'), and the general language level was less formal than that required in most Australian university courses.

*The Easy Writer: Formal Writing for Academic Purposes*, covers basic phrase and clause structure grammar, giving students sentence patterns that help them to write more clearly and accurately and that can be easily adapted to all forms of academic writing. The examples used in the book also aim to increase students' vocabulary so that they would find university texts less daunting, and examples were drawn from a wide range of materials, in many cases, from textbooks currently in use in first year units.

Students are also introduced to the basic terminology of traditional grammar, enabling them to then proceed to and understand more advanced books on grammar and writing (e.g. *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers*, *The Brief Penguin Handbook* or *The Little, Brown Handbook*). The grammar and sentence structure sections are designed as a workbook, and there are many exercises, with full answers included at the back of the book. The aim of the workbook design is to provide practice and to encourage students not to sell the book at the end of the semester, but to retain it as a reference book for the rest of their course.

*The Easy Writer* also covers referencing, paragraph structure and essay writing and includes many model paragraphs and a model essay. A pilot version of the book was first used in 2005, the first edition was published by Pearson Education in 2006, and the revised, second edition was published in late 2008. Feedback from students has been very positive, and some students have subsequently said that the course was the best and most useful one that they had studied at university, and that even in second and third year, they used it as a reference book.

My 'Nuts and Bolts' presentation will cover the writing of the book (including getting copyright permissions), the rationale behind the design of the book, how the book is used in the course, and what comes next. At present, I am writing a teacher's book that will include writing and other activities suitable for seminar groups. Many of these are drawn and adapted from strategies and techniques that are usually

associated with ESL teaching, but they are proving to be particularly successful with domestic students who have little writing experience or expertise. Such a handbook is also necessary when writing courses are increasingly being taught by permanent or casual staff who may have no training as language teachers.

The session would be useful for anyone involved in the teaching of academic writing and of interest to those who wish to write their own book and get it published.