

<i>Fundamentals of Academic Writing (Beginning)</i>		
Author:	Linda Butler (2007)	
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Pp. xi + 227	978-0-131-995574	\$27.50 US

This textbook is a traditionally sized A4 book, printed in three colours: black, white, and green. It is written with beginning students in mind. Thus, it is at Level 1 within the 4-level Longman Academic Writing Series. Originally, this series had only three textbooks, but due to the demand for a book for lower-level students Level 1 was added later. In the preface, the author ambitiously claims that her book is suitable for beginning-level EFL/ESL students in college, adult education, and secondary school. Such a range of learners covers a wide range of ages, experiences, interests, and career situations. To me, this textbook appears to be intended for multilingual ESL college-aged students in the U. S. This can be seen clearly in several ways: the ages and international make-up of the textbook's characters; the situations mentioned; and many U.S. examples.

The textbook is made up of a Preface, a "Getting Started" chapter, nine chapters on various topics, and concludes with Appendices A-N and an Index. Each chapter (except for "Getting Started") is divided into six parts:

- Preview
- Part 1: Organization
- Parts 2 & 3: Vary between Sentence Structure, Vocabulary, Grammar, and Mechanics (SVGM)
- Part 4: Writing process
- Expansion Activities

This textbook appears to be more product-based (discussed further below) than process-based, although it has elements of both. Each chapter is centred on one theme that would be of interest to college-aged students studying in the U. S. These are all non-academic, personal topics (e.g., Chapter 2: Describing your morning routine).

After looking at the structure and organization of this book in detail, it appears to be based on actual classroom experience that employs the TTT (Test Teach Test) teaching-plan method instead of the PPP (Present Practice Produce) one. Each chapter begins with "Preview," which has two functions: activating the students' background knowledge (insufficiently, though) and helping to determine how much the student knows about the language in question (i.e., the first T, tests). This section provides model paragraphs, usually descriptive, and ignores other common academic-writing rhetorical styles, e.g., compare, contrast, argument, cause, effect, classification. These models illustrate the writing skills (e.g., writing topic sentences) and language systems (e.g., using the simple past) to be worked on in that chapter. Following the paragraphs are questions that can be asked orally. These questions test or determine how much the students know about the skills and systems focused on. I assume a teacher then evaluates the students' answers and decides what to cover in the remaining part of each chapter. After the "Preview" are parts 1-4, which constitute the second and third T's. These parts present or teach the highlighted skills and systems, then test them, usually through questions, fill-in-the blank exercises, and sentence writing.

So, Part 1 teaches and tests (or practices) paragraph-level organization. It clearly presents skills that deal with building effective paragraphs, e.g. writing good concluding sentences. This is quite useful for beginning-level students who need this introduction to writing. This part has many non-academic, real-world topics and language examples, for instance arranging a party. These probably motivate students by personalizing the language and concepts. But do they address students' academic-writing needs?

Parts 2 and 3 can be considered one part in most chapters. Like Part 1, these parts clearly present a teaching point, in this case SVG or M, and have follow-up practice exercises. Included are brief and clear explanations and examples that won't overburden the beginning student. One strength of these sections is that routine formulaic phrasings (*according to* is one) are used to present and explain how English works. This approach aids in writing for academic contexts because academic writing frequently uses such discourse markers. Unfortunately, grammar is presented out of context, unrelated to text types; such contexts would facilitate understanding grammar concepts. The author needs to revisit balancing keeping things simple for a beginning student with contextualized language examples. Also, students' vocabulary needs are barely touched upon in these sections. No direct teaching/presentation of vocabulary is to be found. It is only included when used to illustrate a grammar or other point (e.g., Chapter 7, Part 3).

Following this sentence-level work is the "Writing Process" part, which integrates the teaching of process writing and guided free-writing. This part helps students use what

they have learned in the previous parts to write whole paragraphs. The highlights of this part are (1) outlining the steps in writing and including several useful editing and revising checklists, and (2) the exercises guiding students toward maintaining a writing portfolio.

It is hard to please all the people all the time but this textbook could please some of the people all the time. It will please those writing teachers who value a structured, bottom-up, discrete-point approach to writing. In other words, this book assumes that students learn writing as they do math: learning the 'nuts & bolts' of language (one nut or bolt at a time) and tying them together to make sentences, then paragraphs. As previously mentioned, this textbook devotes two parts of each chapter to SVGM, aka language nuts & bolts. Such a distribution translates into more than half the textbook being devoted to SVGM.

Nevertheless, most students and teachers can benefit in at least one way from the way this book approaches writing. Its chief advantage is that there is no need for the teacher to bring in supplementary nuts & bolts work from other textbooks that may or may not fit in with this textbook's theme. In the latter case possibly disorienting or distracting students. The disadvantage of this approach is that it often results in students writing stilted and inauthentic sentences to say nothing about being, from the start, headed in the direction of producing Lego-type paragraphs and, later, essays.

Furthermore, the amount of space devoted to nuts-and-bolts study reduces the time students might spend on "top-down" work. Specifically, thematic readings and related work are missing. Even though each chapter has a theme, there are few readings and vocabulary directly related to the theme (other than the preview's model paragraphs). Students aren't given much chance to brainstorm, reflect, and do other process work to develop their writing. (The textbook's "Previews" don't do this very well.) Student writing often benefits from such process work because students bring a lot to the writing table that needs to be drawn out and integrated into their writing. The two or three pages devoted to this fruitful work in each chapter are not sufficient. Teachers may have to bring in or expand upon existing top-down exercises.

Another issue is the non-academic content in this so-labeled academic-writing textbook. Examples of academic content that could be included are at least some vocabulary from the AWL (Academic Word List) and TOEFL-style paragraphs. It is true that at this beginning level exposing students to full-blown TOEFL-style paragraphs and a lot of AWL vocabulary could be overwhelming and discouraging. However, some of this can be successfully integrated within the existing content. Students at every level have academic expectations that need to be met. One alternative is to start with general English and move towards more academically focused language. Frankly, there appears to be little difference between this beginning academic-writing textbook and other general-English writing textbooks (e.g., *Get Ready to Write*). As a result, teachers are left searching for more academically oriented examples, language, themes, etc.

This beginner level of *Fundamentals of Academic Writing*, despite its shortcomings, is a textbook that can aid an instructor in teaching ESL writing. If used in conjunction with other material, it can help students just starting the writing journey. Additionally, the heavy emphasis on SVGM makes the book an excellent resource for students to refer to throughout the course (or afterwards). As such, I would encourage ESL academic-writing teachers to use this textbook more as a resource or in conjunction with other more process-oriented, academically focused material.

References

Blanchard, K., & Root, C. (2005). *Get ready to write: A first composition text* (2nd ed.). White Plains, NY: Pearson ESL.

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