Book Review

Zhuihui Fang. 2021. *Demystifying academic writing: Genres, moves, skills, and strategies*. New York: Routledge, xii+270 pp. ISBN: 978-0-367-67508-0 (hbk).

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The book *Demystifying academic writing: Genres, moves, skills, and strategies* is an insightful, accessible, and useful book written by Zhihui Fang who has been devoted to language education and literacy research from the perspective of functional linguistics. In this book, the author regards language as a creative resource for meaning-making from the perspective of functional linguistics, thus engaging undergraduates, postgraduates, and verdant scholars to attend to language choices in key genres of academic writing, and instructing them in skills and strategies for academic writing as well as scholarly publishing. As such, the book aims to help these potential readers be more competent in academic writing or build a successful academic career.

Structurally, the book consists of three parts: (1) unpacking academic writing (Chapter 1 through 4), (2) writing academic genres (Chapter 5 through 10), and (3) maximizing success in writing and publishing (Chapter 11 through 12). In addition to these main sections, there are two appendices as a supplement to the book.

As an opening section, the first four chapters of the book give a general introduction to academic writing, including definition and linguistic features of academic writing and skills and strategies for academic writing. According to Chapter 1, academic writing is defined simply as the writing done for academic purpose but vividly described as a type of conversation which is used to express our ideas to others like daily discourse, nonetheless more rigorous and well-formed than daily ones. Chapter 2 outlines six correlated characteristics of academic writing, including formality, density, abstraction, objectivity, rigor, and structure. By comparing with everyday writing, Fang notes that academic writing is generally considered more formal, dense, abstract, objective, rigorous, and tightly knit. That is to say, academic texts tend to have a logical and coherent structure, deploy academic language choices which are precise and strictly adhered to grammatical, spelling, or phonetic rules, be full of information or concepts, technical terms, and abstract expressions (e.g. nominalization), foreground ideas in an unbiased way, and background their speakers. Therefore, the author contends that academic writing exists on a stylistic continuum along

various dimensions – generality, density, technicality, abstraction, explicitness, authoritativeness, conventionality, formality, connectivity, precision, tentativeness, rigor, and responsibility (p. 14). Chapters 3 and 4 describe fundamental skills for academic writing and primary linguistic resources and strategies needed for instantiating them. In total, the author puts forward 16 skills: (1) contextualizing; (2) summarizing; (3) quoting; (4) sourcing; (5) agreeing/disagreeing; (6) evaluating; (7) defining; (8) exemplifying; (9) explaining; (10) describing; (11) comparing/contrasting; (12) classifying/categorizing; (13) referencing visuals; (14) entertaining opposition; (15) recommending; and (16) connecting. For the first six skills, they depend heavily on writers’ reading capacity (p. 37), which are spotlighted in Chapter 3 and illustrated by defining and deconstructing. To be specific, contextualizing refers to the process of connecting one’s ideas with others, involving three interconnected moves – establishing a territory for inquiry, identifying knowledge gaps or research needs in the existing literature, and stating the purpose of your study. When summarizing others’ research, the summary should be objective and relate to one’s work. It proceeds in four steps – reading the source text, selecting information from the source text based on the research purpose, paraphrasing the selected ideas, and combining paraphrased parts into a piece of writing. When quoting directly from the source text, one shouldn’t overquote and should avoid “hit-and-run” quotes (Graff et al. 2018: 44). While quoting or citing, one should also acknowledge the source text to enhance writing credibility, so sourcing is also indispensable in academic writing. In addition, agreeing/disagreeing and evaluating are also needed to express one’s ideas. The former reflects one’s reaction to others’ work, which could be conveyed explicitly or implicitly; the latter shows one’s attitude towards the target topic or others’ research. For the rest of the 10 skills, they are presented in Chapter 4, which might largely depend on reflecting and critical thinking. Specifically, the chapter describes how to define concepts or terms; how to classify or categorize ideas, methods, or objects; how to describe things or processes; how to explain phenomena and findings clearly or justify claims and actions appropriately; how to exemplify points of view; how to compare and contrast related things; how to incorporate visuals (e.g. charts, diagrams, graphs, maps, photos, tables) into the piece of writing; how to address the opposing view in a way that could not damage one’s study’s credibility; how to make recommendations for future research; and how to weave different parts of writing into a cohesive text. Taken together, Fang admits that acquiring these skills could be challenging, which requires a good deal of reading and writing practice; therefore the author encourages readers to devote time and energy to exercising and executing these skills and templates (or “sentence skeletons”) provided in the book at the end of Chapter 4.

The second section is comprised of six chapters (Chapters 5–10) that elaborate on rhetorical moves, essential writing skills, and major linguistic resources and strategies for writing key academic genres. These genres are reading responses, book reviews, literature reviews, argumentative essays, empirical research articles, and grant proposals, which are often considered to be of great value and importance in the academic community (p. xv). Chapter 5 focuses on reading responses, which reflect readers' comprehension of their readings. Fang proposes four necessary rhetorical moves needed for writing this genre needs, i.e. (1) introducing the stimulus text(s), (2) summarizing key or valuable points in the text(s), (3) stating your reactions to the text(s), and (4) recapping your feelings and the value of the text(s) in the concluding part. To illustrate how these moves are unfolded and what linguistic resources are chosen to instantiate these moves, the author analyzes two reading response essays in detail, which are written by a graduate student and an undergraduate student respectively. Through analysis, it shows that the two essays are both constructed in accordance with typical rhetorical moves of reading responses, and employ transition devices to connect sentences or paragraphs, evaluative words or phrases to express feelings, and hedges to temper their evaluation. At the end of the chapter, Fang reiterates the importance of writing a reading response. He argues that this interpretative task can improve students' understanding of content materials and help them learn knowledge across disciplines effectively and in a more meaningful way. Chapter 6 describes how to write book reviews. At the outset of the chapter, the definition of book reviews is presented; that is, a book review refers to "a review of a newly published book or a set of newly published, relevant books" that is regarded as valuable in its related academic field (p. 111). In addition, Fang gives a brief introduction to a book review, including its necessary elements, pros and cons, and differences between a book review and a book report. Then, Fang elucidates the structure of a book review, which is consisted of five parts. In other words, a book review involves five rhetoric moves, namely providing bibliographical information about the book, introducing the context of the book, summarizing the content of the book, discussing strengths and weaknesses of the book, and making a final evaluation and recommendation about the book. In this chapter, the author also selects two book review samples from different academic fields and discusses their linguistic features or strategies and discursive constructions. Fang finds that the two book reviews are both written in the third person and constructed in a way following the fore-mentioned rhetoric moves. In terms of linguistic features and strategies, the most common resources exploited in the two essays are transition devices (e.g. reference, conjunctions, substitution), caution language, and nominalization. Chapter 7 sheds light on how to write a literature review (a review of prior studies on one topic). Firstly, Fang identifies two reasons why a literature review is needed in writing a research paper, as follows: (1) it can help you situate your work based on

existing scholarship and extend it in some way (p. 126); (2) it can help you identify problems in prior research so as to guarantee your work's justification. Because of the importance of a literature review, Fang not only introduces rhetorical moves in a literature review but also demonstrates how to go about writing a literature review. For rhetorical moves, Fang provides five steps, i.e. introducing research context and significance, summarizing key points of prior research, evaluating prior research, identifying research gaps in prior research and then providing a rationale or guidance for future work, and finally recapping the knowledge gaps in existing research and your suggestions for addressing the problems (p. 127). For the process of writing, it is suggested that writers can follow in this way: determining the scope → locating and selecting relevant studies → reading and analyzing the studies → constructing a coherent review (p. 127). In Chapter 8, Fang demystifies how to write an argumentative essay, a genre of academic writing which suggests writers' stance on an issue by virtue of argumentation and supporting evidence. He puts that argumentative essays could be classified into three types on the basis of structures, which are balanced essays (or Rogerian style of argument), persuasive essays (or Aristotelian style of argument), and a Toulmin model of argumentative (pp. 147–148). Therefore, Fang describes rhetorical moves of the three types separately. Based on that, he clarifies common linguistic resources in argumentative essays, involving resources for displaying knowledge (e.g. abstract nouns, long noun phrases, and technical phrases), resources for establishing an authoritative voice (e.g. the third person, declarative sentences), and resources for constructing a well-structured text. Like argumentative essays, writing empirical research articles is also a common academic task for students. Hence, Fang illuminates this genre of writing in Chapter 9. He firstly introduces staple parts of an empirical research article, including abstract, introduction, theoretical framework, literature review, methods, findings, discussion, and conclusion. Then each of these sections is explained singly from several aspects, mainly their functions or significance, essential elements, and rhetorical moves. To elucidate how to write each section further, the author provides samples for each section likewise. Besides these basic sections, the author also discusses other parts of an empirical research article, including references, acknowledgments, and appendixes. Finally, the author encourages students to learn how to express one thing in a diversified way because an empirical article usually involves a large amount of repetition. The last chapter of Section II (Chapter 10) focuses on the grant proposal, which is a formal written request for funding certain research. Fang notes that funds could be from both inside and outside. In other words, we can obtain funds from our own institutions or from external sources such as government agencies, professional organizations, or private foundations. Then the author sets forth the process of developing a grant proposal, which includes three steps. Firstly, applicants should figure out the nature of the proposed project, involving its

purpose, research questions, significance, target readers, possible findings, budget for the project, and the research schedule. Next, applicants need to identify their funding sources and learn about their general information. Thirdly, applicants should develop the proposal in accordance with submission guidelines.

Section III helps readers build capacity for academic writing and publishing. In consideration of difficulties in finishing a quality piece of academic writing which needs much time and effort, Fang shares a number of tips and ideas that are found to be helpful in academic writing in Chapter 11. They are as follows: (1) fostering writing habits that work for you; (2) reading deeply and widely; and (3) developing linguistic awareness (approaches to improving linguistic awareness: note how familiar grammatical resources are used in a novel way; observe how the same meaning is expressed in different ways; be curious about new words, phrases, or other grammatical structures; compare how texts are simply or differently structured within and across genres; and play with new language patterns); (4) persevering through the writing process that is recursive in nature; (5) attending to key elements of academic writing (including audience, purpose, organization, style, flow, clarity, and appearance); and (6) overcoming cultural barriers. In the next chapter, Fang describes the overall process of publication from submission to print, manuscript review criteria and provides some tips for increasing success in getting published. As the process of publication is rigorous and complicated, Fang firstly uses a figure to demonstrate it, then elaborates on each phase of the publication process. Meanwhile, he gives some samples to illustrate different situations at each phase. In terms of manuscript review criteria, Fang discusses four typical dimensions that most reviewers take into account, including the significance of the research to the field, methodological soundness, rigor of interpretation and argument, and quality of writing. At last, Fang presents some useful tips for academic career development or academic growth according to his own experience in the rest of Chapter 12, which are as follows: (1) write about something that you really care and know about; (2) know the outlet you are targeting; (3) find people of like interest to collaborate with; (4) be patient and persistent; (5) stimulate dialogues with potential reviewers; and (6) use feedback to improve writing. To conclude, the author reiterates the above-mentioned tips and ideas, which would increase students' or scholars' chances of getting their academic writing published.

Overall, the book fulfills its intended purpose, which is pragmatic/practical and reader-friendly. On the one hand, the book could be used as a quick reference in which numerous templates for academic writing are provided for undergraduates, postgraduates, and verdant scholars to employ while writing. On the other hand, these potential readers could learn and grasp writing skills critically and effectively. In the book, the author selects different types of authentic

academic writing authored by undergraduate or graduate students and experienced researchers and then analyzes these samples in accordance with the academic writing skills and strategies offered in the book. In this way, potential readers would be aware of their mistakes or deficiencies in academic writing and acquire the essential skills which are mentioned more than one time throughout the book. Moreover, the book could also be used as a textbook, where the author designs a few assignments for readers to help them reflect on the gist of each chapter and encourage them to relate their academic experience to the content of the book so as to identify their strengths and weaknesses in academic writing and guide them to put what they learn into practice. As a result, readers' academic literacy might be developed through such reflective and interactive instruction. Last but not least, there are specific explanations for some less familiar meta-linguistic terms at the beginning of the book and rich examples to illustrate differences between academic writing and everyday writing throughout the book, which also enhance the readability of the book. In spite of these merits, the book has its limitations. In the genre-based writing section of the book, the given samples or exemplified descriptions are mainly selected from texts in the field of humanities and social science, which may be less relevant to students majoring in other disciplines, especially logical ones. Thus, the popularity of the book might be undermined to some extent. Besides, the present work is though highly valued for its theoretical background, which approaches academic writing from the perspective of functional linguistics and so promotes the development of functional linguistics in the field of education, meanwhile it results in difficulties and challenges for students who are unfamiliar with functional linguistics. Some other works about academic writing (e.g. Gillett et al. 2019), by contrast, seem to have a vague theoretical background and avoid using professional terms, so these works are more easy to understand for students majoring in various subjects. Despite these drawbacks, the book will definitely serve as a truly important resource for students to improve academic writing.

References

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