

The relevance of the emergent method of writing for academic knowledge-building - excerpt from Cameron Richards' *Doing a PhD: An optimal self-help guide* (2026)

As the eminent physicist-philosopher David Bohm has suggested, 'relevance' is an emergent, exploratory, and ultimately 'open and dynamic' (rather than 'closed, fixed and top-down') process by which diverse and implicit interests might be transformed into an explicit strategy and content of coherent 'focus and structure'. In other words, there is an alternative way to descriptive/unfocused, ad hoc and reactionary or defensive thinking - which is not only intrinsically much more significant, productive and satisfying, but also much more effective as a strategy of academic writing for 'knowledge-building' in various senses of the term. The 'critical inquiry' strategy outlined below is thus especially relevant for academic research projects and the writing of dissertations, theses or other academic assignments - and also various related genres of expository, academic and/or intellectual writing (including arguments, position papers, essays, and investigative features or reports).

With relevant 'focus and structure', the writing up of an academic inquiry or project can become a reasonably straightforward and relatively stress-free emergent process. Not just this, but an effective 'outcomes-based' organising structure of writing for knowledge-building can transform the process into one that [in some ways] can be one of 'basically just connecting the dots' as a constructive knowledge-building process (and not a descriptive one). In short, this paper aims to debunk the apparently quite widespread notion that a 'non-relevant' (descriptive and/or ad hoc) approach is quickest, easiest and ensures 'successful' accreditation or evaluation - that is, to argue that there is a way in which relevance can be the key to the most effective, efficient and 'successful' completion of an academic inquiry or project. The strategy, template and associated methods discussed below have been refined and made more explicit through the active participation of many of our postgraduate students in a continuing 'dialogue' about this over a number of years.

NOTE: Written to summarise my earlier development of the concept of *an emergent approach to academic writing*, this particular 'essay' was actually composed in August 2007. As evidenced also by its more conversational style, it was produced for distribution to postgraduates and early career academics at related workshops and staff development seminars at that time (not for publication per se). At that stage, the related ideas in it had emerged over almost a decade of acting as a postgraduate supervisor to both PhD and Masters postgraduates when working at QUT and UWA in Australia.¹ There were various

¹ My first (co-supervised) PhD postgraduate (at QUT) was Kay Kimber (then deputy-Principal of Brisbane Girls Grammar, a leading school in Queensland). When her PhD [*Learning Through ICT: A case study of computer-generated concept maps and students-as-designers in humanities classrooms (QUT)*] was finally completed and published in 2001, Kay generously made the following comments in her acknowledgements section: 'In terms of Dr Richards' supervision of the drafting and revisions of my thesis, his expectations were always of rigour and fine attention to detail to achieve a coherence and logical flow of the argument, clarity of communication and consistency of style. He demanded a tight correlation between the study problem, modes of inquiry and presentations of findings. It was through Dr Richards' strict critique of the thrust of my analyses and academic writing that the quality of my thesis improved, as did the refereed journal articles and conference papers that were produced along the journey. Throughout this lengthy process, he remained calm, empathetic and focused. His experience with the examination process and thesis-marking approaches was transferred into purposeful mentoring that is confirmed by the fact that my

later adaptations of this (working with many more postgraduates as an approved mentor as well as supervisor at several South-East Asian universities) of this as variations rather of *a framework of academic research-based knowledge-building* over the next decade or so – which is the updated and convergent focus of the next chapter. The original 2007 version remains relevant as my early stand-alone attempt to address the four ways and stages that postgraduates can ‘get lost’ in the process of research-based academic writing essay. I decided it would be useful to include it here (mostly unchanged) to introduce the overview next chapter of how the emergent method in a sense underlies (as well as ‘precedes’) the convergent aspects of a related ‘foolproof’ guide to optimal academic knowledge-building. I also want to point out that any initial perceptions of possible ‘mere repetition’ of some points and parts would generally fail to adequately or appropriately appreciate the ‘spiral learning’ application that initial or early discussions of an idea (including any related diagrams) should naturally be included in later and/or more developed applications of this also within different relevant contexts of discussion.

The emergent method of academic writing from the outset of a PhD project?

Many people undertaking the process of research-based academic writing find it a most difficult and stressful experience. There are plenty of books written on this or related subjects with useful information about a variety of approaches. Yet these can add to the confusion experienced by postgraduate researchers in particular when trying to navigate a minefield of diverse models and conflicting expectations about what it means to use intellectual rigour to hopefully contribute to human knowledge – at least in terms of using academic formats and conventions. As reflected by the many examples of those who never finish a research thesis and those who barely do, it is quite easy to get ‘lost’ along the way and fail to appreciate or apply an integral thread design to integrating the different elements (as well as related stages) of a dissertation.

As suggested earlier, it is generally not too difficult for a discerning critic (or examiner) to recognise retrospective, superficial and *ad hoc* efforts to make overall sense of disparate sections or give the impression of focused integrity and continuity. This guide has been put together to outline a practical fool-proof strategy based on experience which might help to simplify and clarify the process, provide a sustaining reference-point for different stages and elements of the exercise, and at the same time ensure the grounding of a project or topic in associated contexts of both personal interest and wider (i.e. even innovative as well as substantial) academic relevance.

As also indicated in Part A, the concept of an emergent method of academic writing was inspired in part by the ‘process writing model’ popular in schools in the early 1970s – and still somewhat influential today as a model of distinct if related stages of composition (especially the key stages of planning, drafting and editing towards a final draft and product). Like school students ‘frozen in the spotlights’ by the notion that they must come up with an initial essay draft with correct spelling and grammar, many postgraduate researchers tend to be similarly paralyzed by internalized ‘perfectionism’ when it comes to writing a dissertation. This is in addition to the mistaken assumption that academic writing is just what you do in the final stage of a research

thesis examiners’ only request for revision was one typographical correction - in the appendix. I received similar testimonies and feedback over the next decades from other postgraduates, but perhaps suffice to just mention this first occasion of methods that were further developed. I have listed in the references list below an example from this experience – one of four papers co-authored with Kay linked to her PhD (Kimber, Pillay & Richards, 2007).

project (forgetting that it is the written dissertation which is ultimately the key to successful outcomes). As mentioned, the main strength of the process writing approach is exemplified by the first draft advice ‘don’t get it right, get it written’. With some preparation most people find that the act of such a writing approach is itself a useful learning method on the fly – and that new ideas as well as a growing sense of confidence often comes as one is writing (and likewise in the further drafting process).

As Figure X below projects, the emergent method might be envisaged as the middle way between the process writing and the kind of top-down ‘structured’ approach by which a concept or topic is descriptively broken down into a classified tree diagram of further related concepts and specific details. This is typically a descriptive approach applied in different ways to (a) a literature review written mostly as an ‘annotated bibliography’, and (b) a process of ‘data building’ for its own sake with little if any relevant links to the earlier literature review section – as well other sections of the dissertation.

The emergent method of academic writing also extended into the knowledge-building process (more the focus of the next chapter) has been compared to the descriptive model writing and knowledge-building - which in Part A also, we likened to a walking backwards with a rear view mirror’ tendency. Such a tendency can be largely avoided or turned around with effective guidance or direction grounded in (rather than merely imposed upon) practice and common sense, as well as informed by a renewed or ‘relevant’ notion of the critical inquiry process. To put this another way, we will attempt to outline and detail how the effective initial design of a pertinent focus and substantial structure for either writing or developing a research inquiry should ensure that progress is relatively straightforward and, at the same, serve to overcome various obstacles including the following: any enduring or overwhelming sense of confusion about the process or direction taken; different views, models and expectations by any projected audience of readers or even examiners; and, above all, the challenge of clarifying and prioritising the central inquiry purpose and focus.

This essay has been especially aimed at those who have started on or about to start a postgraduate thesis and associated research project, but can be adapted to re-organise, refine or even ‘rescue’ theses and projects in need of ‘revision’ (see next chapter). It further outlines the principles of inquiry and project design applicable to other related notions of academic writing, inquiry, and project development. It has been organised to generally reflect the key requirements and principles of a relevant design ‘focus and structure’ and how these relate to a developing or unfolding of some kind of developed response to an implicit if not explicit focus question for inquiry and knowledge-building.

‘Don’t get it right, get it written’: How the process writing model helped inspire a related notion of ‘emergent academic writing and research’

As an undergraduate I had the privilege of participating one semester in an early 1980s tutorial class supervised by Professor Ross Fitzgerald (a well-known and widely published writer in - but also beyond - his role as an eminent historian in Australian academia). It was an inspiring semester with his tutorial sessions always producing the kind of interesting and colorful discussion of ideas and different perspectives or opinions that one might reasonably expect in all ‘higher education’. But what I have never forgotten about this encounter was the advice given by Ross as an apparent

counter-intuitive secret of university assignment writing: ‘don’t get it right, get it written!’². Of course, I was later to appreciate that his advice was meant to convey some of the key insights of the process writing method popular in some late 1960s and- early 1970s school classrooms to encourage active learning. In other words, if one has done the prerequisite reading, thinking and/or discussion about any subject or idea, then the act of just ‘starting to write’ (not worrying about the final product) usually overcomes any residual fears or obstructions and unleashes a process of refinement as you go that enables an initial essay or assignment draft that can then be polished up with further revision and editing efforts.

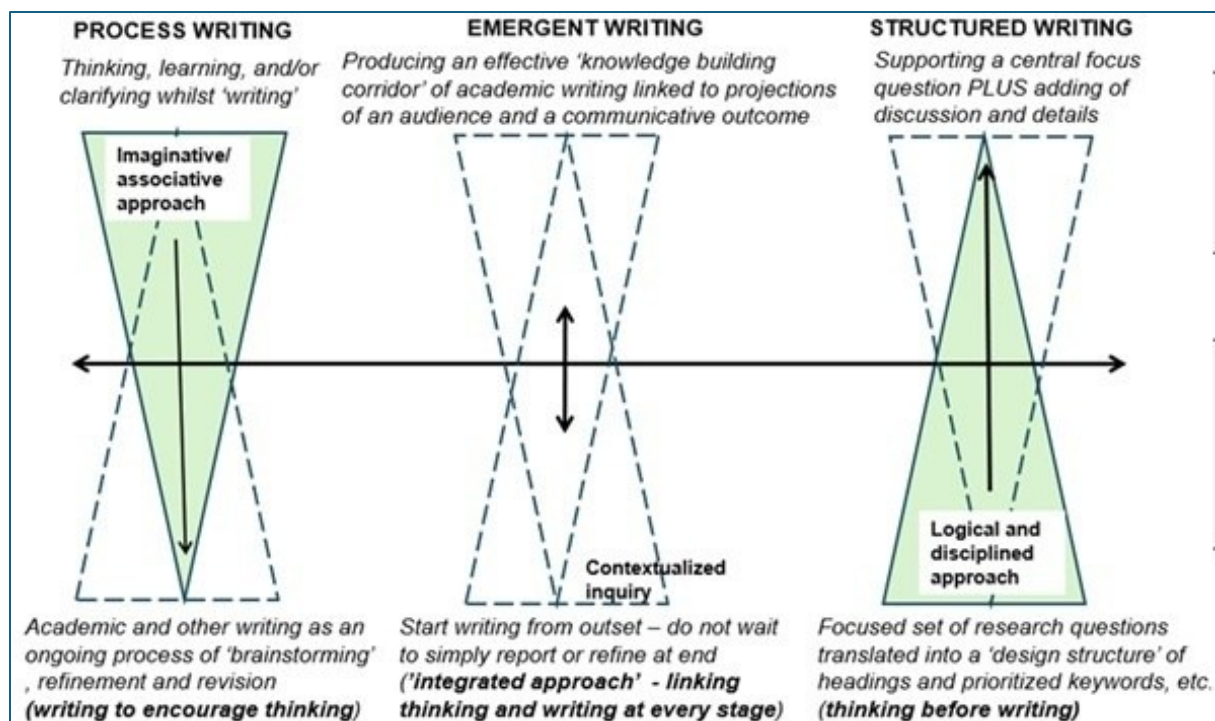
In the 1990s, the 1970s process writing model of Donald Murray, James Britton, and others was still somewhat influential in Queensland schools, although not so much in academic teacher education (my then colleagues were mostly into selective models of ‘critical literacy’ or of ‘functional grammar’ by that stage). Britton’s influential study *Language and Learning* (1970) usefully demonstrated that all individuals (and especially young learners) make practical sense of the world through words. He also promoted the view that expressive language-use through writing especially (which could better involve both participant and spectator language roles) could also generally encourage more effective thought and communication.

In practical terms, it was the initial method of encouraging learners ‘to just start writing’ within a class (or outside) - that is, writing with no particular thought of an audience or the intimidating demands of correct spelling and grammar. This earlier model of process writing was therefore much concerned with the promotion of free-form or imaginative self-expression (i.e. for ‘personal growth’) – exemplified by the ‘creative’ writing or telling for others of poetry and stories. A key idea of the ‘progressive education movement’ of those times (especially of the related notion of ‘discovery learning’) (e.g. Murray, 1998), it was a general model that had attempted to escape the intimidating notion that writing might be expected to be somehow immediately a grammatically correct ‘final product’.

By the 1990s those that still promoted ‘process writing’ in education had begun to focus more on the importance of how writing might be more effectively practiced as a process of ‘textual production’ (not so much learning) involving distinct if related stages of composition – especially the key stages of planning, drafting and editing. In the somewhat influential Flower-Hayes (1981) model of process writing, writing was generally seen as also a process of ‘translating ideas into visible language’. This was a notion perhaps also somewhat more relevant to expository as well as argumentative modes or genres of language-use when compared to the then dominant ‘expressivist’ emphasis. But arguably a social model of writing generally overtook the ‘discovery learning’ emphasis of that earlier model. It focused more on the ‘audience’ purpose of creating meaning as part of the communication between writers and their readers – with the function of revision distinguished from that of mere editing in terms of ‘re-revisioning’ a written text in terms of its projected reception by specialist vs. general readers.

Fig 5. The ‘foolproof approach’ of the emergent writing method inspired by ‘process writing’

² I have only recently found out (more than forty years later) that Ross borrowed this phrase from the American writer James Thurber – and then adapted it as advice also for academic assignments. At the age of 80 he recounted this in a recent Medianet Blog interview on the occasion of his latest book publication – now 48 authored or edited books so far (<https://www.medianet.com.au/blog/ross-fitzgerald-2024>).



Whilst this was (and is) all quite useful for young postgraduates wanting to become proficient in writing for academic publication (or dissertation submission) purposes, there remains a large gap concerning relevant planning designs for transforming not just words into ideas – but ideas and related statements into a coherent knowledge-building text of some sort. Our solution to this issue in terms of the deep learning function of 'optimal human knowledge-building' was to come up with what we call the 'emergent writing' model to accompany our related emphasis on the importance of a 'relevant focus' (and related design and/or purpose) to also organize academic writing and research. This approach represents a convergence of the essential insight of the process writing model (i.e. 'don't get it right, get it written') with the more organized 'structured writing' method that should accompany any relevant academic design [as we discuss further in the next chapters of this book]. As indicated in Figure 5 an emergent writing approach builds on 'the basic structure' of a relevant 'design' but continues to harness the process writing through not just the core knowledge building purpose – but also the related ways and stages of writing as a process of planning, drafting (including efforts of revision) and editing towards a final product or ready publication aimed at a relevant audience.

As can be seen, our projected 'emergent method' of academic writing converges the various insights and powerful motivational force of the process writing model with those also of a more 'structured' approach (that in isolation lends itself to the use of AI writing tools with often little thinking needed or applied). It likewise reconciles a convergent and alternate use of both 'imaginative/associative' thought and 'logical/disciplined/top-down' thinking as well. This key point indicates a central way in which the further development of this method in subsequent chapters here (i.e. as a 'foolproof approach' to academic writing) can help 'rescue' postgraduates, early career academics and others from the descriptive research approach (and its related 'surface learning' model). This is exemplified, for instance, by the narrow strictures of the IMRAD (Introduction, Methodology, Results and Discussion) format and process of academic writing

recommended for ‘scientific’ research papers in particular (to be discussed further) – and related ‘equivalents’ in other kinds or fields of academic and scientific inquiry.