



The Academic Writer's Toolkit: A User's Manual

By Arthur Asa Berger, Left Coast Press, 2008

Reviewed by Jacqueline Bennett, SUNY College at Oneonta

Writing is arguably one of the greatest challenges professors must face. From routine departmental correspondence to peer-reviewed manuscripts, writing plays a crucial role in professional advancement. Some of the obstacles facing writers that result in projects not getting started, let alone completed, are not knowing where to begin or lack of familiarity with the expectations of the genre in question. *Toolkit* addresses rules governing the major academic genres, offers advice on how to generate and develop ideas, and provides strategies for developing a project from outline through final product. Thus, this book would be a valuable resource for anyone seeking advice on how to overcome these initial hurdles. *Toolkit* is different from other academic writing books in that its primary focus is neither on self-management nor on the fundamentals of writing, but on specific strategies that will enable its readers to become better academic writers. As such, this book is intended for professors and those planning on becoming professors. *Toolkit* covers the expected genres of academic writing (e.g., journal articles, books, etc.) and also offers guidance for mundane writing tasks like e-mail and memos, which are often neglected by other writing books.

Toolkit begins with a brief introduction in which Berger is tasked (à la *Mission Impossible*) with composing a book on writing that would provide professors with tools to improve their academic writing skills. *Toolkit* is then organized into two major sections. In the first section Berger talks about the writing process: what academic writing is and the how audience affects style (Chapter 1); how keeping a journal can enhance idea development and writing confidence (Chapter 2); how to progress from outline to final draft (Chapter 3); how to use the basic mechanics of writing, including thesis statements, paragraph structure, transitions, and style (Chapter 4); and strategies for clarifying ideas and presenting information (Chapter 5). In the second section Berger focuses on the rules and suggests approaches for writing within specific academic genres: memos (Chapter 6); academic letters (Chapter 7); reports (Chapter 8); proposals (Chapter 9); journal articles (Chapter 10); books (Chapter 11); and other genres, such as e-mail messages, faxes, conference papers, theses and dissertations (Chapter 12). The book concludes with a “Coda” section, in which Berger summarizes some of the more subjective benefits of writing. For example, he loves to write because he finds it to be an “act of discovery,” where he uncovers ideas and realizes relationships that were previously hidden to him.

Each chapter begins with quotes that serve a two-fold purpose: they embody the content of the chapter and provide examples of skillful writing. Peppered throughout each chapter are additional quotes that demonstrate particular ideas. For example, in Chapter 1 Berger provides excerpts of a technical and then a more general treatment of media in mass culture to illustrate how audience affects writing style. In several chapters Berger offers advice on how to improve the clarity and accessibility of one's writing. He cautions, “...academic writing doesn't have to be dull, boring, turgid, and riddled with jargon,” and practices what he preaches by writing in a casual style that includes occasional flourishes of humor. In Part II he provides summary examples of each type of academic writing along with careful descriptions of the necessary components of each genre. One of the most effective stylistic techniques that Berger uses is to offer an alternative take on suggestion boxes. Rather than being a customer feedback mechanism, his suggestion boxes serve as a list of tips for tasks such as revising texts (p. 41) or writing in an accessible style (p. 52), or as an overview of the basic skeletal structure for each genre (throughout Part II).

Toolkit fulfills its main goal of equipping professors with strategies and advice that will help them become better academic writers. Though some of Berger's suggestions for writing approaches are subjective and may not work for everyone (e.g., revising from hard copies only), his ideas are sound and worthy of consideration. Berger has written over 100 articles and 60 books, among which are works of both fiction and nonfiction, and taught writing for over three decades; thus, he is uniquely qualified to offer writing advice on a variety of genres. Because Berger assumes his readers are already competent writers who want to become better writers, Toolkit is not an appropriate choice for someone who needs in-depth coverage of the mechanics of writing. That being said, Toolkit is an excellent how-to guide for anyone wanting clarification on what the expectations are for writing within different academic genres or advice on getting started on a writing project. Toolkit is not an exhaustive writing resource, nor does it claim to be, but would be an excellent beginning to a personal writing library if used in conjunction with an appropriate style guide.