

Book Review

Sword, H. (2017). *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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Helen Sword, author of *Stylish Academic Writing* (2012) and *The Writer's Diet* (2016), is a staunch campaigner for shaking the dust off academic writing. She advocates that style, elegance and readability are not incompatible with rigorous research reporting. In her most recent book, *Air & Light & Time & Space* (2017), Sword turns her attention away from texts and shifts the spotlight onto writers. She collected extensive data to explore the habits and experiences of academic writers – how they write, when, where and how they feel when they write. Drawing on 100 interviews with successful academic writers and 1,223 questionnaires from participants at her writing workshops, Sword showcases academic writing experiences. Through extensive quotations and profiling, she illustrates the mixed, mottled and varied practices that writers engage in.

In her own usual elegant style, Sword weaves her findings around a central metaphor: “the house of writing.” This house metaphor provides a framework for organising and making sense of the vast amounts of data she collected. The cornerstones of the house of writing are BASE habits: **B**ehavioural, **A**rtisanal, **S**ocial and **E**motional. *Behavioural habits* are the habits of writing time, scheduling, and finding spaces to write. Analysing the experiences of the interviewees and workshop participants, Sword paints a picture of the wide-ranging habits that academic writers use. Sword also found that successful writers engage in *artisanal habits*. These are practices that recognise writing as craft requiring continual learning and skill development. The on-going honing, refining and polishing of words, sentences and paragraphs results in writers who view writing as always a work in progress with something new to learn in every written piece. Artisanal practices take time and dedication. The third BASE point of the house are a writer's *social habits*. Here, Sword recognises that writers rarely write alone and even individually written pieces have some readers who contribute to the finished piece. Sword found that her productive participants maximized their social habits. The final BASE point in the house of writing is how writers manage their *emotional habits*. Sword's research shows that successful academic writers not only regulate their emotions, they also find ways to enjoy the

writing process. Emphasizing pleasure and growth in writing results in increased motivation and inspiration. With this BASE, Sword encourages academic writers to build their own house of writing which can be shaped by individual contexts, preferences and quirks. The bulk of the book is devoted to exploring each of these cornerstones in detail. At the end of each chapter, Sword provides a “Things to try” section with ideas of activities for readers to adjust their own writing habits. Included in this section is a “Read a book” paragraph containing useful suggestions for further reading.

Sword’s underlying message in the book is that there are many routes to success as an academic writer. As she suggests: “At the heart of much of the self-help literature lurks a puritanical belief that productivity is a mark of personal virtue, while failure to publish denotes a deep-seated character flaw” (p. 4). Her book refutes these beliefs and attempts to counter the persistent myth of “effortless productivity” (p.78). Rather than suggesting that successful academic writers write in particular ways that others should follow, she presents a full variety of experiences. This holistic and inclusive approach to writing will do much to slay the doubt, envy and guilt that often accompany academic writers.

Sword also presents some interesting statistics drawn from her workshop participants. She found that 47 % of questionnaire respondents reported that they had learned to write informally through trial and error, or with feedback from others, 38 % in addition to learning informally, had read books on academic writing or participated in one-off writing workshops, mentoring programs or writing retreats. She called this semi-formal learning. Only 15% had formally learned to write through taking a credited course. As she suggests this is a paradox, since as academics we spend so much time writing, yet so little attention is paid to formally building foundations. Sword also found that women PhD students were three times more likely to feel negatively about their writing than other writers in the study – food for thought.

Interweaving her own experiences and habits, Sword gently edges readers to write courageously, and “dwell poetically” and “rebuild our academic habitus into a place of possibilities” (p. 202). This is a book that is aimed at a broader audience of academic writers rather than those in writing studies. Although the interview questions, methodology and data analysis processes are presented in the Appendix, the bulk of the evidence in the book takes the form of quotations from interviewees, and writer profiles. The writer profiles are interspersed within the overall text providing a somewhat disjointed flow to the chapters. Readers interested in writing studies will be all too familiar with many of the issues Sword raises but will find some of her new concepts, particularly the notion of the

artisanal writer, refreshing. For broader audiences, *Air & Light & Time & Space* will no doubt persuade many a writer to begin constructing their own house of writing.

References

- Sword, H. (2016). *The writer's diet: A guide to fit prose*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Sword, H. (2012). *Stylish academic writing* (2nd Ed). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.