



Sword, H. (2017). *Air & light & time & space: How successful academics write*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

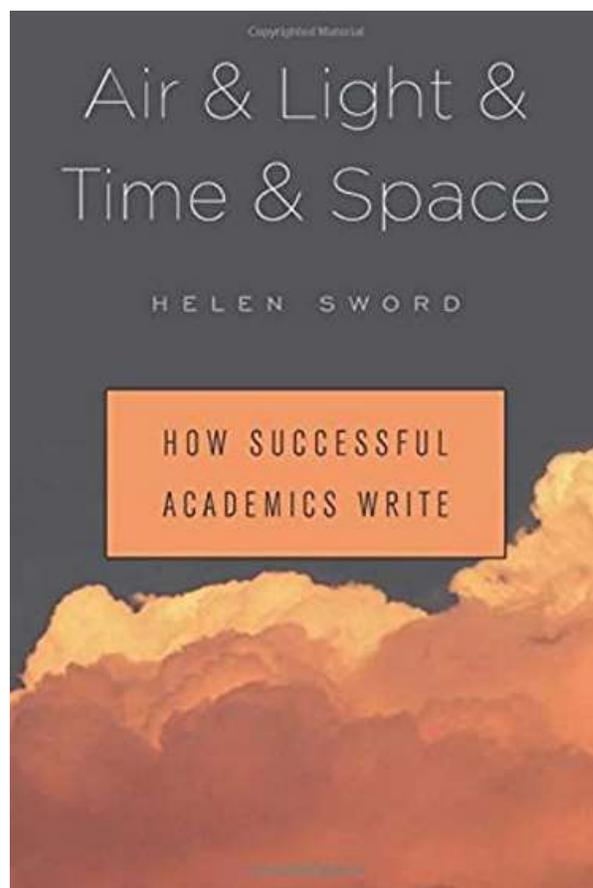
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It is easy to find books that will tell you how to write. Some are better than others. If, like me, you are an academic, your professional work and standing may rest heavily on your ability to communicate research and theory in unblemished and compelling prose. In fact, your formal invitation into the academy (tenure) may depend upon it. The pressure is real.

If, like me, you seek to improve your writing, you have perhaps consumed any number of resources on the topic. With unabashed enthusiasm please allow me to recommend yet one more: Helen Sword's *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write*. This book somehow manages to be simultaneously light as air and grounded in the art and craft of writing. This is not an accident. Sword conducts studies of academic writing and publishes the results as how-to books and on her “[writer's diet](#)” website. Her published books include *The Writer's Diet* (2016) and *Stylish Academic Writing* (2012). Both are staples in many academic writing courses. Her work is consistently engaging and helpful,



and *Light & Air & Time & Space* is a welcome addition to her oeuvre.

Organized into four sections, her most recent book describes Sword's vision for how writers can build and expand the "BASE" for their writing home. Picture a quadrilateral with the corners labeled B-A-S-E. The quadrilateral may be narrow or wide, symmetrical or lopsided. The metaphorical spaces we carve out and habituate as academic writers arise from our personal BASE – the Behavioral, Artisanal, Social, and Emotional habits of writing we cultivate. Each cornerstone is expanded into three chapters, and each chapter offers findings from Sword's most recent study. A total of 1,223 international participants responded to her survey on academic writing, and her data set includes interviews with 100 participants. The participants varied by experience, from PhD students to well-established career academics, by gender, by region, and by native language. Her analysis of the interview data synthesized responses from nine sets of writing-related prompts designed to elicit Biographical background, Formation of writing identity, Academic work habits, Emotions and risk-taking associated with writing, Pride in a particular written work, Response to negative feedback, Writing in English (for non-native English speakers), and Advice to early-career academics.

Perhaps because Sword carefully curates her collected responses, all are helpful and most seem hopeful. I resonated most with responses that described overcoming fear related to writing. In my own work, I frequently battle imposter syndrome and it was useful to read that I am in good company. Beyond that, Sword offers a clear picture of how others continually tackle related problems. Each chapter includes interview excerpts from three participants, adding depth and texture to Sword's claims. For example, in the chapter *Writing for Others*, Sword distills her data into useful suggestions: strive for clarity;

avoid condescension; solicit feedback from people you can count on; learn what specific audiences are looking for; pay attention to the comments of anonymous peer reviewers but don't let one or two negative reviews derail you; and above all, let your readers see your passion for your subject. Each suggestion represents a category drawn from Sword's analysis of her data and is exemplified by a quote from a scholar, such as this illustration of the call to show passion: "One way to find one's voice is to show one's enthusiasm for what one is writing about. I'm very interested in how you can write about what you love in a way that that love is conveyed" (Ludmilla Jordanova, History, Durham University). Perhaps a subtle point, because the book is peppered with such quotes, yet Sword showcases the thinking of hundreds of academics, many of them junior in their fields. In this way, Sword elevates up-and-coming scholars when she presents their comments.

Each chapter concludes with exercises designed to help the reader expand the dimensions of their own writing BASE. The chapter *The Pleasure Principle* includes tasks titled Learn from the Past, Get Frustrated, Find your Happy Penguins, and Read a Book. Perhaps you are wondering about the penguins. Sword explicates:

If playful penguins and soothing nature videos don't get you in the mood to write, what does? A conversation with a friend about why your research excites and interests you? A run, a swim, a walk in the park, some quiet time in the garden?

Sword is thorough in sharing the highs, the lows, and the creamy middles of academic writing. She pulls back the veil on feelings and states of stuckness, panic, euphoria, and steady production. Sword pays attention (and homage) to the additional labor of writing in English as a second language, or from the margins of the normalized centers of academia. In other words, Sword's analysis is

extensive and inclusive. There is something for every academic writer.

As to the lows of writing, Sword and her squadrons of scholars normalize the anxieties that come with writing and offer practical advice on managing them, even turning them into fuel. The chapter *Risk and Resilience* includes this reflection by Victoria Rosner, (English, Columbia University): “Rejection feels horrible, but the feeling has a shelf life. And you just develop your plan: *Well, this didn’t get in here, so I’m going to do this to it and send it there.* As soon as I have a plan for post-rejection action, I feel a lot better.” Who hasn’t struggled with the rejection of a manuscript? This chapter normalizes a painful experience and sheds light on reframing it in terms of future success.

The book invites readers to establish a “BASE” that supports their choice of house of writing. One could inhabit a cozy yurt in the mountains, a stylish penthouse in the city, or a cottage retreat in the countryside. Imagine curling up in a comfortable chair with a warm cup of whatever makes you happy or hosting a buzzing discussion group designed to solve the dilemmas of a writing project. You can write solo, you can write in a group, you can

write in an uncomfortable chair, you can write in your pajamas. The only criteria for success is this: that you write. The unspoken corollary is this: that you celebrate your writing successes, no matter the size. These are the highs, and sometimes the creamy middles.

For me, the most important thing is that Sword invites her readers to envision their own writing success. I get plenty of advice, both explicit and implicit, on how to admonish myself into writing and judge my efforts harshly. *Air & Light & Time & Space* asks me to acknowledge the painful sticky spots of academic writing – it also encourages me to find joy in it. I find joy far more motivating.

Writers must find their own path to successful writing. Sword's research supports the wonderful notion that you can, and should, choose your own best routes. Chock full of observations built from careful analysis and helpful exercises to hone one’s craft, *Light & Air & Time & Space* invites you to invent and nurture your best writing self. Knowing the real limits on time to read such books I offer my full endorsement for Helen Sword's latest love note to you, yes, you, the academic writer.

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## References

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

## About the Reviewer

**Jennifer Ruef** (jruef@uoregon.edu) is an assistant professor of mathematics education at the University of Oregon. Her research interests include issues of social justice and equity, identity and power. She studies how people understand what it means to be “good at math” and believes we are all math people.



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