

Review of *Academic Writing and Dyslexia: A Visual Guide to Writing at University*

Christina Elizabeth Healey
University of Sheffield, UK

Wallbank, A. (2018). *Academic Writing and Dyslexia*. Routledge, pp. 196, £32.99, ISBN 9781138291492

Students, with or without specific learning differences, frequently report difficulties with sequencing, expressing ideas on the page and maintaining focus. Could a Visual Approach help them? This review seeks to answer this question on behalf of all writers at the university. The author of this book presented his ideas at the Association of Dyslexic Specialists in Higher Education (aDsHE) Conference in June 2018. The blurb for this Workshop spoke of his 'bespoke visual strategies' for helping dyslexic writers: 'Developed by a dyslexic, for dyslexics, the workshop explores how meaningful visual templates, icons, metaphors and prompts can be used to harness the 'big picture' strengths, multidimensional thought processing and visual learning preferences of dyslexics so that students can play to their strengths and write academic essays with confidence' (from the ADSHE Conference minutes, 2018). This review, by a tutor and writer who is also dyslexic, explores these ideas and asks if such a visual approach fulfils its promise to be relevant for all writers, whether dyslexic or not.

The 'dyslexic' dimension

Each of the chapters is addressed specifically to students who identify or have been identified as 'dyslexic'. Wallbank either asserts himself or quotes others as asserting that 'dyslexics usually have high intelligence' (Wallbank, 2018, Foreword), and are 'some of the smartest people' (Wallbank, 2018 p. 1). 'We think differently ... it is from this difference that the dyslexic brain derives its brilliance' (Wallbank, 2018, p. 39). This could be a well-intentioned exaggeration given the British Dyslexia Association's (BDA) view that 'Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities' (BDA, 2021).

However, the dyslexia focus need not exclude EAP tutors or, more generally, academic writing tutors. Second language students may be dyslexic in their first language (Godwin, 2018, estimates 10%). Equally, some of the challenges of studying in a second language are similar to the dyslexic experience, such as slower reading speed or problems with false friends. English as a language may also be less 'dyslexia friendly' than other languages due to its lack of consistency in spelling patterns. Wallbank's book does well to help students consider strategies to meet the demands of academic writing, considering how to enable students to meet relatively inflexible academic writing expectations while retaining some individuality and creativity.

The visual approach

Multi-modal teaching approaches are common among practitioners of specialist study skills teaching in HE (see aDsHE website). Wallbank uses his construct of dyslexia to justify his particular use of a 'visual approach':

Dyslexics are predominately right-brained, visual thinkers – words are secondary considerations. Dyslexics think holistically and visually, and this is why it is necessary to visualise the patterns and underlying meanings of writing as a means of understanding its content and structure. (Wallbank, 2018, Foreword).

Such a construct of dyslexia echoes Ron Davis, one of Wallbank's heroes, and how he explains the process of reading. It is interesting for readers to think about the alternative ways of processing the written word, but Wallbank's book is about writing. How do 'standard' undergraduates convert their academic reading into academic writing? The long answer is via a series of stages including analysis of the task, validation of possible sources, selection, summary, synthesis and interpretation of sources and finally the construction of an appropriate response to the task. How can a dyslexic student who prefers to 'prose' holistically and visually manage to produce writing which can be read linearly and sequentially? The short answer is 'with difficulty'. Can empathetic visual guidance help? And how does Wallbank go about offering it?

Firstly, and not surprisingly, the book is visually attractive. It's quite large, at A4 size, and spreads out invitingly. It looks readable, even though there is not much space for students to make their own notes. Wallbank frequently uses three contrasting colours, blue, green and orange to make distinctions, for example, between the three parts of an essay question. There are frequent orange star splattered 'TIPS'. Text is indicated by an unrolling scroll. Triangles, inverted or standard, are used to indicate increasing or decreasing levels of focus and specificity. Essay introductions are visualised by an inverted triangle –which is an exact visual equivalent of the frequently used 'funnel introduction'. One frequently used icon is a fingerprint to indicate 'evidence'. Overlain by a magnifying glass, this icon signifies 'Look closely at the evidence'. Approval or disapproval of particular strategies is indicated by up- or down-turned thumbs.

Ironically, considering his argument that words are 'secondary considerations', the writer offers an engaging and conversational tone:

- 'not all sources are created equal and some are more suitable than others' (p.12).
- 'critical thinking ... can be the most fun part of academic study' (p.40).
- 'Pythagoras ... may be a key authority on triangles but he was no expert when it came to geography as he was a keen advocate of the idea that the earth is flat' (p.53).
- 'Lecturers often spend a great deal of time agonising over the wording of assignment tasks and questions, so you should do the same' (p.66)

Wallbank also has considerable credibility as a practising academic within the university – one can easily believe the 'thousands of essays' he has had to read and mark (Wallbank, 2018, Acknowledgements). He also comes across as an enthusiast, engaged with his subject and thereby engaging his students. It is well-suited that the book starts with the transition from school/college to university, although this perhaps overlooks a more diverse student population (for instance, mature students may have a higher incidence of dyslexia). The first substantial chapter is Chapter Two, 'Reading to Write,' following the increasingly-agreed view that academic writing depends upon academic reading (e.g. Wingate, 2015).

Working within this spirit, Wallbank's Chapter Two is comprehensive, though perhaps too comprehensive to be truly learner friendly. He considers the uses of both skimming and scanning as ways of finding specific information for use in academic writing. There is a need for a certain amount of editing here. Wallbank refers to SQ3R without any explanation or acknowledgement, which is ill-suited for students who may be reading their first undergraduate study skills guide. He goes through the processes of skimming and then scanning in detail – processes he seems to assume should be applied sequentially to the same text. He uses his three different colours to offer valuable insights into how to use titles, subtitles, abstracts, contents pages and indexes to identify the relative usefulness of three articles. There are also practical tips on how to produce a printed 'scroll' to get the big picture as well as warnings against reading strategies he regards as ill-advised such as 'sounding out' individual words. Other advice is more problematic. He attempts to show how students can 'identify key sites of meaning in sentences and clauses' without resorting to any accepted grammatical concepts and advocates using the visual format of a horizontal Christmas Cracker to identify 'Big picture/topic > Action > Detail. Since this template is not applied to any actual texts, its usefulness remains unproven.

Chapter Three is to be commended for tackling such a complex issue as criticality. Wallbank is very good at asking questions in relation to critical thinking and reading, each question with an accompanying icon. Not surprisingly, it is difficult to convey these icons in words:

Table 1.

What is the best way to approach and practise critical thinking?

QUESTION
A. Research background and motivations
1. What's the problem?
2. What's the motive?
3. What's the context?
B. Research methodology and evidence
4. Is the methodology sound?
5. How good is the evidence?
6. Are there rival causes?
C. The argument
7. Is there ambiguity?
8. Are there any assumptions?
9. Are there appeals to popular opinion, beliefs or emotions?
10. Are there false causes or dilemmas?
11. Is the author biased? (<i>The author seems to have lost 12&13</i>)
14. Are the conclusions valid?

Note. From Wallbank, 2018, pp. 42-62.

So does a visual approach help develop critical thinking? This reader has reservations; mainly because some of Wallbank's icons are as arbitrary as any more conventional orthographic mixture of sounds and ciphers. It might help some students remember what questions to ask but twelve questions seems rather excessive.

Chapter Four, 'Essay Genres and Structures,' starts appropriately with decoding an assignment task. It identifies three main components: content/topic keywords, activity key words, focus or limitation key words. Wallbank eloquently describes the difficulties faced by students – and not just dyslexic students:

One of the first problems you come across when writing the main body of an essay is the challenge of linearity. While good writing needs to be linear and clearly organised, our thoughts are not! (p.76).

Wallbank's visual solution is the 'Christmas Cracker':

One of the best ways of conceiving of the overall structure or 'big picture' of your essay is to think of it as resembling the shape of an upturned [i.e. vertical] Christmas Cracker. This will enable you to think carefully about the overall aims of the various components of your essay and map these onto an easily memorised and recognisable shape, the outline of which provides you with a template for knowing what to write about, when and where" (p.69).

The cracker icon continues to dominate much of Chapter Five ('Visualising Effective Paragraphs'). The Assignment Question at the beginning at the widest point of the first triangle is linked, following a triangular Introduction, to the Thesis Statement at the narrow end of the triangle which leads into the rectangular Main Body which itself consists of a number of paragraphs, each of which starts with an inverted triangle containing a Topic Sentence at the beginning of a mini cracker which then links to the next paragraph and the next Topic Sentence. The Conclusion starts at its narrow end with a Thesis Statement and then widens out. This offers a powerful visualisation of how Question, Thesis Statement and Topic Sentences are all linked together. However, in my dyslexic experience, and perhaps in the experience of non-

dyslexics as well, the real problem is, firstly, how to organise sentence-length items of meaning into coherent paragraphs and only secondly how to find the right order for these paragraphs.

Wallbank reverts to the Christmas Cracker template in Chapter Six ('Presenting Your Argument') to visualise the 'three basic components of any sentence' (p. 141), Topic, Action and Detail. Wallbank claims that this is easier for dyslexics to understand than Subject, Verb, Object, though the presentation in this chapter is slightly muddled with lots of pictures of undulating green lines around the familiar concept that 'ideas move in a wave pattern from the given to the new across sentences' (p. 77).

Conclusion

It is not possible to deal in detail with everything that Wallbank covers. But I hope there is enough in this review to inspire curiosity. It is not altogether clear whether this is a guide to be read by students or mediated through a tutor. But it is in no way remedial. This is a book about how to get a First. As has been seen, linear sequences don't always work. Neither of the supposed 'unique selling points' of the book – the visual approach and the dyslexia focus – are completely fool proof. This is one more guide to Academic Writing. But it is a guide crammed with ideas and teaching suggestions, some of which are highly practical. Read it, Engage with it, Dispute it, Re-design it. As Wallbank himself says (p. 11), most academic learning is dialogic. It is to be hoped that he gets full recognition for his generosity both in championing difference and in sharing some quality teaching materials.

One final point. Recently, this reviewer shared the book with one of her dyslexic students. This was the response: 'I have found this book to be a very insightful, helpful and a rewarding book to read especially for adults returning to higher education.'

References

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