Books to Help You Write Well

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Why Write Well

Most of us like to think that we are good writers. We may well be. But the act of writing a document as considerable as a dissertation often proves daunting even for the best writers among us, and, in general, writing is a skill that beckons for continuous improvement. To explore your fears, and to see how other scholars have addressed their fears as well as what they have to tell you about writing and writing well, you might do well to start with these books. I have tailored this list to benefit my students, which is to say the readings lean towards qualitative research in the social sciences. Many of the lessons they provide, however, are universal. I make no claims to be a good writer, but I try hard to be one. And although I don’t agree with every point these authors make (I, unlike several of them, am a big fan of the outline), I do think they give excellent advice, and I encourage you to heed it. You may wonder why writing well is important: I expect you will argue that the pressures of completing your dissertation and fighting a tenure clock provide little free time for the fine points of fine writing. I understand those hardships, but as an academic, you want your readers to engage with your ideas. Your readers will struggle to do that if you give them a manuscript that has grammatical errors, spelling mistakes, problems in logic, violations of style, and little clarity of thought. These books will help you avoid those errors so that you can have the conversations you want to have with your reviewers, editors, dissertation committee, and colleagues. Moreover, if you learn to write well (e.g., no passive constructions, no unreferenced pronouns, no abstract nouns), you will find that writing (and especially revising) takes less time than if you refuse these lessons. Perhaps best of all, these books should help you to start writing, to accept false starts and rough drafts as normal parts of the game, and to write according to a schedule not a whim.

Great Books on Writing

1. Becker, Howard S. 1986. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book or Article*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
2. Thurman, Susan. 2003. *The Only Grammar Book You’ll Ever Need: A One-Stop Source for Every Writing Assignment*. Avon, Mass.: Adams Media.
3. Truss, Lynne. 2003. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. New Yor: Gotham Books.
4. Van Maanen, John. 1988. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
5. Wolcott, Harry. 1990. *Writing Up Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
6. Zinsser, William. 2001/1976. *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. New York: Harper Collins.