

The Art of Writing in the Rain

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This presentation is intended to help academic researchers to write better. The focus will be on the process of writing grant proposals, papers, dissertations and monographs (and not on research methodology). We will pay particular attention to:

- 1) The introductory paragraph or abstract as a means of clarifying your concerns (both for yourself and for your reader), and 11 essential points of a good abstract; and**
- 2) The use of a purpose/content rubric to structure, manage and tighten your writing.**

I will then use sections of my recent research grant proposal for Hong Kong's Humanities and Social Sciences Prestigious Fellowship as an example.

1. The Introductory Paragraph or Abstract

Not all academic writing lends itself to the following, but where appropriate, the introductory paragraph or abstract should *briefly* outline as much of the following as possible:

- 1) The ***problem*** that the paper addresses;
- 2) The ***question*** that arises from that problem;
- 3) The ***thesis, claim, or proposal*** which you seek to justify or explore in the paper;
- 4) The ***aims*** and ***purposes*** of the paper;
- 5) The ***research context, or theoretical paradigm*** and ***literature*** in which you're writing;
- 6) The ***premises*** or ***assumptions*** from which you start;
- 7) The ***method*** which you use to answer your research question and achieve your aim;
- 8) The ***results*** you find;
- 9) The ***conclusions*** you reach;
- 10) The ***outcomes*** of the paper;
- 11) The ***significance*** of the paper.

The following might be roughly what an opening paragraph or abstract could look like. Naturally each sentence need not be structured as in this example.

It might also, given the conventions according to which you're working, not be appropriate to use the first person.

The point is that an introduction or abstract should deal briefly and explicitly with these issues, making a clear map for your reader.

You should find this a useful means of clarifying your concerns (both for yourself and for your reader). It is accordingly a good idea to write it first, at the initial, planning stages, and last, in final editing and polishing.

In this study I address the **problem** of The main **question**, arising from this problem, which I address is My central **thesis** in addressing this question is My **aims and purpose** in this study are thus to The **research context** of this study is in the domain of ... literature / theory. I start from the **premise** that ..., assuming that The **method** I use to achieve these aims is My **results** show that ..., and from these I **conclude** that The **outcomes** of this study are The **significance** of this study lies in

In short, this study **addresses the problem x by doing y in order to achieve z.**

This last sentence is a summary of **what** the study does, **how** it does it, and **why** it does it.

In a more substantial project, such as a dissertation or a monograph, the second, longer, paragraph could expand spirally on the first, thus:

The **problem** which I address lies in Associated with the key **question**, q, are the questions r, s, and t. My **thesis**, ... (say a little more about your thesis). While my main **aim** in this study is a, my **purposes** are also b, c, and d. The central **theory / literature / research findings** on which I draw in this study are My **assumptions** that form the premises of this study are warranted because I have selected the **method** of research, m, because (Say a little more about your **results**.) Apart from my major **conclusion** ..., I conclude further that Apart from its main outcomes, this study also has the following **outcomes**: In addition to the **implications** i and j, these conclusions have **applications** k, l, and m, and **consequences** n, o, and p. Thus the further **significance** of the study lies in

Introductions that use a 'hook' paragraph:

Note that you may choose to introduce your study by devoting the first paragraph to a 'hook' that engages the reader's curiosity with a vignette that illustrates your main concerns.

Bent double in the rice paddy, Ma Yan stretched her aching back, raised her arm and waved to her twin brother as he eagerly set off for school in the early morning mist. She smiled to him, happy for him that he at least could still revel in the wonders to be discovered at the feet of their teacher, in the classroom in which they had both learned together – at least until last summer. And so she could not hide the sadness in her smile as she asked herself once again why it was that, since last autumn's scrawny harvest, there was money enough to send her brother to school, but not her.

Ma Yan's story is probably played out in every rural village in China: when the consequences of poverty strike deep, so does gender discrimination in education, as families exclude their daughters from school before they will keep their sons at home....

This **inductive** technique can work well, but bear in mind that it is a less formal approach than is required by some journals.

2. Structure: The Purpose/Content Framework

Once you have at least a rough draft of the 11 points of the abstract, prepare a ***Section and Sub-section Outline*** that shows the ***heading*** of each section and sub-section (as far as you are able to at this stage). Under each section and sub-section heading, write just two sentences:

“The ***purpose*** of this chapter/section/sub-section is
It therefore contains the following ***content that serves that purpose***:
....”

For example:

Section 2.1 The consequences of poverty for the education of girls

The ***purpose*** of this section is: to establish the study’s premises by identifying the major consequences of poverty for the education of girls.

To that end, its ***content*** is therefore constituted by a review of the principal findings of the main studies in this domain, consolidated thematically (rather than chronologically or regionally).

Let all of your writing be driven by purpose:

Let this purpose/content rubric guide all of your writing through any research project / paper. It will help you to manage and control the whole project, and will help to keep your writing tightly focussed. (Naturally it will need to be changed as you work your way through the project.)

Note: These statements of purpose and content are not included in this explicit format in the final paper. But they can be re-written more subtly and used as signposts to guide your reader through the final text, especially if it is a big piece, such as a dissertation or monograph.

Ask yourself the following questions with respect to the structure:

- Is it evident that the paper has been written with a *definite purpose* in mind, strictly in accordance with an *outline structure*?
- Have you used *subheadings* that denote the major sections of the paper?
- Are the ideas presented in a *natural order* so that they are *clear* and *accessible*?
- (*Ice your draft and then re-read it cold, from the perspective of a first-time reader.*)
- Are the paragraphs thus *linked in a natural order* that follows a logical sequence in constructing the argument?
- (*Scrutinize your draft meta-cognitively: “What point am I making in this sentence/paragraph? [And why!] So what point should I make next?”*)
- Does each paragraph *start with a topic sentence* that captures the *essence* of that paragraph?
- Does each paragraph deal with *one particular issue*, providing explanations, illustrations, arguments and counter-arguments with regard to only that particular issue?

Hong Kong Torn Asunder

***Values, ethics and education out of
the impasse***

Notes: Selection of a topical and important problem.

Project Objectives / Abstract

Hong Kong has been left, following months of clashes over the nature of its relationship with mainland China, divided from itself and torn asunder – socially, culturally and politically – from the country of which it is, ultimately, an integral part. The Special Administrative Region is at an impasse. Leading public intellectuals in Hong Kong (Cheung, 2020; Lui, 2020) are calling for dialogue, for a reconstituted public and personal ethics, to find a way out.

Ultimately, the roots of this impasse lie in a clash of values: the liberal autonomy associated with western democracies against a strongly interpreted communitarian ethos typical of Confucian Heritage cultures. The fractures consequent on the recent protests in Hong Kong reveal a clash of identity, values and ethics as wide as can be found in cross-cultural clashes anywhere.

My principal objective in this project is to answer the question how this clash of values might be reconciled, first, by defending a principle-based ethics and, second, by setting out how cross-cultural differences in values might be resolved by recourse to transcultural values and educational ideals.

Notes: Identification of the problem; question; aims/objectives; method.

My defence, first, of a principled ethics builds on what I have defined as “the ethics of integrity” (Mason, 2001a) as a set of moral principles to guide young people through this clash and in their moral comportment more generally. The ethics of integrity are founded in respect for each other as persons, and in the duty to take responsibility for our actions.

The resolution, second, of axiological differences across socio-political divisions, builds on the work of Harvey Siegel (2002) and on my deployment of the ethics of integrity in resolving clashes of values and ethics across cultures (Mason, 1995; 2005a). Citizens of Hong Kong and of mainland China of course share tremendous amounts in common both socially and culturally. My intention is to build on Siegel’s and on my earlier work in resolving moral differences across cultures to lay the groundwork for a dialogue both within Hong Kong and between Hong Kong and mainland China that will help to find a way out of this impasse.

My final objective in this project is to show how these ethics might be embedded in education in Hong Kong, through a consideration of: (a) education and culture; (b) education for reason and rationality; and (c) educational change in the context of complexity.

Notes: Use of the first person; showing the relevance of my earlier work to the proposal; keeping sentences relatively short; relevance to education.

With regard to (a), I draw on my earlier work in comparing education across cultures (Mason, 2007c; 2014a; 2014b; Evers & Mason, 2011) so that the embedding of such values and ethics might be done with the requisite degree of cultural sensitivity.

With regard to (b), thoughtful engagement with these moral principles and with the arguments I make concerning the possibility of transcultural values and educational ideals requires good thinking. For this I draw on my earlier work in critical reasoning (Mason, 2007a), which in turn draws substantially on Siegel's seminal work in "educating reason" (1988). "Critical thinking" translates badly into Chinese, with severely negative connotations. My intention here is to emphasise the education of reason by drawing on Siegel's necessary reasoning skills and dispositional attributes to develop the degree of rationality needed in our students – indeed by all – to get through this impasse.

And, with regard to (c), education systems are deeply resistant to change. Many initiatives, of whatever nature, fail to gain traction. In the final section of this project, I pay attention to how educational change might best be initiated and sustained, by drawing on my earlier work in complexity theory (Mason, 2008a; 2008b; 2009; 2016a; 2016b; Szekely & Mason, 2019). Complexity theory provides insights into how new properties and behaviours emerge in a system, and into how they are sustained through notions of scale, complexity, "inertial momentum" (Mason, 2008a), and what economists refer to as path-dependence and lock-in.

Notes: One paragraph – one idea; sentences in a natural order; keeping sentences relatively short; note the comma in "might best be initiated and sustained, by drawing on" (think/read from the reader's perspective).

The significance of this project thus lies in its potential impact in laying the groundwork for a public discourse that might help to heal Hong Kong; and in defending values and ethics that might guide the education of young people in Hong Kong through this conflict.

The objectives in summary:

- To answer the question how the clash of values between Hong Kong's young people and the government (in both Hong Kong and Beijing) might be reconciled,
 - a) first, by defending a principle-based ethics and,
 - b) second, by setting out how cross-cultural differences in values might be resolved by recourse to transcultural values and educational ideals.
- To show how these ethics might be embedded in education in Hong Kong, through a consideration of:
 - a) education and culture;
 - b) education for reason and rationality; and
 - c) educational change in the context of complexity.

Notes: Clear statement of significance; clear summary before moving on.

Background of research (the next section of the proposal)

Hong Kong has been left, following months of clashes over the nature of its relationship with mainland China, divided from itself and torn asunder – socially, culturally and politically – from the country of which it is, ultimately, an integral part. The Special Administrative Region is at an impasse. Never before have the people of Hong Kong seen themselves as so separate from China (Lui, 2020): this at the same time as the political relationship between Beijing and Hong Kong is closer than ever. In an article entitled, “Protests and pandemic: will pent-up resentment, frustration among Hong Kong’s youth explode again into social unrest?”, the *South China Morning Post* of 5 January 2021 reports that Hong Kong is sitting on a powder keg, its young people and university students seething with rage. The article reports on a survey by two universities in Hong Kong that found that “nearly 90 per cent of students had no confidence in the government, describing their simmering grievances as a ‘powder keg waiting to go off’”. Researchers from the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong say that, “We seem to have accumulated a lot of gunpowder, but we have not tried to defuse the bomb yet. Maybe it will only take a spark to cause another big explosion.” Public intellectuals in Hong Kong (Cheung, 2020; Lui, 2020) are calling for dialogue, for a reconstituted public and personal ethics, to find a way out.

Notes: Expanding spirally – not linearly – at this stage.

...

Objective 1(a): a defence of a principle-based ethics

By way of providing a wider context to these issues in Hong Kong, I consider in the early sections of the project some key questions about the contemporary nature of moral comportment and, more specifically, questions about how moral responsibility is easily diminished in late modern society. Such diminished responsibility, as observed by Charles Taylor (1991) and Zygmunt Bauman (1993), is associated with a contemporary sense of individual identity that is increasingly transient, fragile and fragmented. Anthony Giddens (1991a; 1991b) speaks of identity as “disembedded” as a principal consequence of late modernity. Taylor describes an increasingly individualist outlook on the world characterized by a minimal sense of moral responsibility to others.

Notes: Now linear progression: move slowly and carefully; using first names of authors when first cited.

Bauman characterizes late modern society in terms of four key moral issues.

First, he argues that our actions have consequences and ramifications well beyond what we're able to foresee because of the complexity of a world made up of infinitely many social interactions. Who could have foreseen that one case of zoonotic viral transmission in Wuhan, if that is indeed what happened and where it happened, would have the catastrophic global consequences that it has in the past year? It is impossible, therefore, to set down ethical rules to guide actions whose consequences we cannot fully anticipate (although, in this case, a global prohibition against the trade in wild animals would seem a good place to start).

Notes: One idea – one paragraph. Should I have done this inductively rather than deductively?

Second, given the substantial division of labour characteristic of the nature of contemporary work in a society dominated by huge corporations, with all its associated technical complexity, we are frequently reduced to being just 'bit players' in the production of outcomes. So, because we are not sole authors of these outcomes, we construct ourselves as not responsible for their consequences. When two Boeing 787 Max aircraft crash shortly after each other with the loss of everyone on board, with 'black box' data indicating that both pilots faced similar challenges in keeping their planes up, who exactly is responsible for these fledgling technical problems (and possible short cuts to profit)?

Notes: Using substantial, non-trivial, familiar examples.

Third, our lives in late modern society, argues Bauman, are typically constituted by the temporary occupation of many different roles, each an important aspect of who we are as individuals, but none of such overriding importance that it alone defines our identity. Someone might be an assembly line worker, a divorcé, a father of adult children, a member of a men's social club, a keen football fan, and a police reservist who carries a weapon when called to. Which of these defines who he is? If none in particular, he will not easily take responsibility for the consequences of his occupation of any one of these roles, which he occupies so temporarily as to not make it meaningfully constitutive of who he is. So there is no readily consistent moral responsibility that suffuses all of his actions.

Notes: By now it's getting a little dense, so...

The combination of these first three moral characteristics of life in late modern society shows just how easily we evade moral responsibility: the first, because we'll never know the consequences of our actions for everyone anyway; the second, because we're only bit players in the production of outcomes far beyond our individual inputs; the third, because it's only one aspect of who we are that is that bit player, after all.

Notes: To make it easier for the reader, a summary of the first three points before moving to the fourth.

And, fourth, should we, in spite of the above, be troubled by some moral discomfort, we no longer have an uncontested source of moral authority or meaning to which we might turn for guidance. Any such source (think, for example, of the role played by religiously based ethics in traditional societies) has been undermined by some of modernity's most consequential features for individuals: the disembedding of the self from traditional communities and what Taylor (1991) refers to as their "horizons of moral significance"; and the strong construction of individuality, exacerbated in late modernity by rampant consumerism and shallow consumer-oriented sources of identity and authority, which leaves popular culture celebrities as among our leading influencers and arbiters of social norms.

Notes: A direct address to the reader to help him/her when there's been a bit of a conceptual leap.

Bauman is a, if not the, leading theorist of moral comportment in late modern society. This is what he refers to, in his seminal text, *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), as the “postmodern moral crisis”. This is the wider **axiological** context in which to begin to understand the challenges of values and ethics facing Hong Kong’s young people today.

Having established this context, my first step in this project, encapsulated in Objective I, is to defend a principle-based ethics, which I define as “the ethics of integrity” (Mason, 2000; 2001a), that might guide young people in their moral comportment more generally.

Notes: Definition of terms when first introduced – should I have defined axiological? Using clear signposting after a philosophically dense section.

I've skipped some paragraphs here, but no worries

.... While Bauman seeks to avoid the universalism inherent in Kant's categorical imperative, his assertion that "if in doubt, trust your conscience" (1993, 250) is surprisingly close to deontological ethics: I will show, by reference to the moral intuitionist, W. D. Ross, that postmodern ethics could almost be characterized as an 'intuitionist deontology'. To get there, I argue that Bauman's non-foundational morality leaves us with little more than a claim of unlimited responsibility for the Other. This Bauman finds in Emmanuel Levinas, who posits an inextricable link between identity and moral responsibility: "I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible" (Levinas, 1985, 101). For Levinas and Bauman, what makes us the unique individuals that we are is our acceptance of the moral demands of responsibility.

I turn then to Ross, who argues that...

Notes: Clear signposting as it gets philosophically denser; should I have defined "deontological ethics"? (An awareness of who your reader/audience is: write accordingly.)

.... The difference lies in that Kant requires further investigation as to whether a conviction could hold as a universal law to establish imperatives that are categorical and not *prima facie*. But, that is where my characterization of Ross's ethics as intuitionist deontology will lie, and how I will show Bauman's argument to be, in the end, intuitionist. I will then argue that

underlying an intuitionist position is an assumed principle: that we respect (Mason, 2001a, 61)

As the first objective of this project, what will be the purpose of this careful derivation, from the most cogent articulation (Bauman's) of the moral challenges facing young people today, of the ethics of integrity? It is because the ethics of integrity....

Notes: More careful signposting as it remains philosophically dense. Again, notice how much easier it is when using the first person. (The debate about first vs third person.)

.... To establish confidence in the viability of this project, there are, however, two important potential counter-arguments that I should mention here.

The first is the argument that principles such as the rule of law and equal liberty before the law are local, specific to Western culture, and therefore have no transcultural normative reach and cannot accordingly be universal....

The second potential counter-argument is built on a claim most commonly associated with Richard Rorty:.....

Notes: Deal honestly and fairly with counter-arguments. Don't construct your opponent as a straw man.

.... Objective 2:

My final objective is to show how these ethics might be embedded in education in Hong Kong. This depends on three aspects of my earlier work: (a) education and culture; (b) education for reason and rationality; and (c) educational change in the context of complexity.

Notes: New section – slowly, carefully; short sentences. Again, building the confidence of the reviewer by building it on your earlier published work.

.... For this I draw on my earlier work in critical reasoning (Mason, 2007a; 2007b), which in turn draws substantially on Siegel's seminal work in "educating reason" (1988). "Critical thinking", as I indicated earlier, translates badly into Chinese, with strongly negative connotations. My intention here is to emphasise the education of reason by drawing on Siegel's necessary reasoning skills and dispositional attributes to develop the degree of rationality needed in our students – indeed by all – to get through this impasse.

I will argue that critical thinking is associated not with negativity, but with rationality. For Siegel (1997), critical thinking means to be "appropriately moved by reasons"; to be rational is to "believe and act on the basis of reasons".

Notes: Be sensitive to the cultural context in which you're writing.

.... Objective 2(c): To draw on the insights of complexity theory to show how positive changes in education in Hong Kong might be initiated and sustained

With regard to (c), education systems are deeply resistant to change. Most initiatives, of whatever nature, fail to gain traction. In the final section of this project I pay attention to how educational change might best be initiated and sustained, by drawing on my earlier and current work in complexity theory (Mason, 2008a; 2008b; 2009; 2016a; Szekely & Mason, 2019). Complexity theory provides insights into how new properties and behaviours emerge in a system, and into how they are sustained through notions of scale, complexity, “inertial momentum” (Mason, 2008a), and what economists refer to as path-dependence and lock-in.

I have deployed from physics this term “inertial momentum” to help explain in the social sciences why education systems resist change. It is because of

the sheer weight of their constituent elements, the connections among them, and their mutually reinforcing connections with factors that constitute the context in which systems are situated. All that constitutes an education system – its teachers, students and curricula, its financing, governance and policies – contributes to its inertial momentum. And all that constitutes the context of that education system – its economic, political and social context, its historical, cultural and geographical context – contributes to its inertial momentum. (Mason, 2016a, 438).

Notes: Clarify, clarify, clarify.

Research Output (including publications) (up to five)

The following five publications are illustrative of the five objectives of this research project:

Objective 1(a): A defence of a principle-based ethics:

Mason, M. (2001) The Ethics of Integrity: Educational Values Beyond Postmodern Ethics. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 35 (1), 47-69. An earlier version, presented as a conference paper (1997), **reprinted** in P. Beilharz (Ed.) (2002) *Zygmunt Bauman, Volume Three*. London: Sage, 180-190.

Objective 1(b): How cross-cultural differences in values might be resolved by recourse to transcultural values and educational ideals:

Mason, M. (2005) A Justification, after the Postmodern Turn, of Universal Ethical Principles and Educational Ideals. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 37 (6), 799-815.

Objective 2(a): To show how the ethics of integrity might be embedded in education in Hong Kong with due regard to cultural sensitivities and differences:

Mason, M. (2014) Comparing Cultures. In M. Bray, B. Adamson & M. Mason (Eds.) *Comparative Education Research: Approaches and Methods. Second Edition*. (221-257). Hong Kong and Dordrecht: CERC & Springer. Translated and published in **Portuguese** (2015), **Russian** (2015), **Korean** (2017), **Turkish** (2022). First edition of this chapter (2007) translated and published in **Italian** (2009), **Spanish** (2010), **French** (2010), **Chinese** (2010), **Japanese** (2011), **Farsi** (2011).

Notes: Building carefully on earlier work. Since only five publications may be listed, show their reprints, translations, etc.

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Recommended reading

Anthony WESTON (2018) *A Rulebook for Arguments (Fifth Edition)*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.