

versations, however, can flourish from disagreement. High-school-age students who are shielded from these exchanges miss vital opportunities to refine their critical thinking skills and better understand the world we live in. Well-planned school excursions to destinations that foster balanced inquiry into global issues can help tomorrow's teachers become peacebuilders in this world.

*Sprouting grass—
asking why and why
little girl*

The above haiku was penned by a former high school teacher of English in Nagoya, Satoru Kanematsu (McMurray, 2022).

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[JALT PRACTICE] WRITERS' WORKSHOP



Jerry Talandis Jr. & Rich Bailey

The Writers' Workshop is a collaborative endeavour of the JALT Writers' Peer Support Group (PSG). Articles in the column provide advice and support for novice writers, experienced writers, or anyone who is looking to write for academic purposes. If you would like to submit a paper for consideration, please contact us.

Email: jaltpubs.tlt.writers.ws@jalt.org • Web: <https://jalt-publications.org/psg>

Exploring APA: Strategies to Improve Your Writing

The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA)* is the official standard upon which many journals in our field, including those within JALT, base their style and formatting guidelines. Now in its 7th edition (2020), the APA manual is more than a simple reference tool for looking up how to format citations¹. It is a veritable academic writing textbook containing staggering

amounts of detailed, authoritative information for improving academic writing skills. In addition to reference style examples for virtually any situation, topics covered include advice for writing and grammar, bias-free language, journal reporting standards, and a full step-by-step breakdown of a research paper's typical path to publication. Given its high value and relevance to TLT readership, I thought it would be helpful to begin an occasional series of *Writers' Workshop* columns that highlight some of its useful content. From time to time, I will dive deep into a section, summarize the content, then connect it more explicitly to our needs here in Japan-based ELT. I hope this series will encourage you to get more out of this invaluable resource.

1 Notable changes in the 7th Edition were detailed in a previous Writers' Workshop column (Gallagher, 2022).

Strategies to Improve Your Writing

This section, which begins on page 125 in Chapter 4, stood out to me for a few reasons. First, at two pages, it is quite short and markedly different in scope to other parts of the book. Most of the 400+ pages are filled with detailed examples and specific advice, but the content here is broadly written, as it needs to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. Some of these common-sense suggestions also touch upon topics we have covered in previous columns, which I will happily point out when appropriate to facilitate some review. After briefly summarizing each strategy, I aim to bridge the gap in our field with more detailed additions and suggestions.

Reading to Learn Through Example

Reading is a great way to improve writing because it enables vicarious learning. For example, if you need to write a literature review, then pay special attention to these sections in longer papers. Likewise, if you need to present complex data in a table, study how other authors in your area do so. In the end, this type of conscious reading will not only help you learn about your topic, but also give you examples for how you can convey your information more effectively.

This common-sense bit of advice is a point the JALT Publications editors have been making for years as part of our annual *Getting Published in JALT Publications* presentation at the international conference. Each of our journals are unique, so careful reading is encouraged to pick up the correct style and tone. Naturally, this holds true for whatever journal you may target for publication. Sending in papers blindly without being aware of the journal's approach greatly reduces your chances of success. Typically, journal editors are sticklers for submission guidelines. If these are not followed to the letter, then your chances for acceptance decrease. Editors are looking for content that fits within their remit, and this extends beyond topic choice to include how a paper is written. Spending time reading in your area should therefore be a standard part of your overall academic writing workflow.

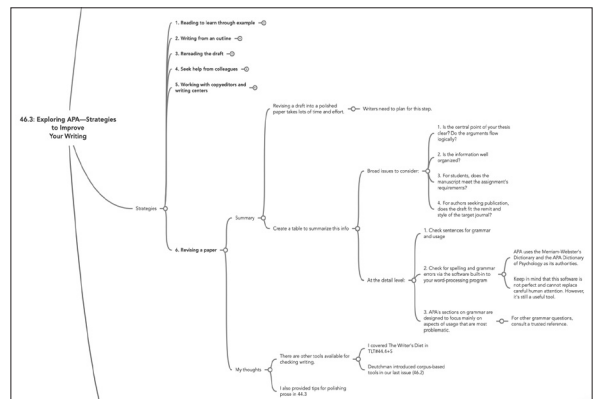
Writing From an Outline

Before you write your first draft, create an outline and then use it as a map to guide you along. Doing so ensures your paper will reflect the logic of your research and ideas. In general, outlines help organize your thoughts in coherent fashion and help you avoid unnecessary tangents or omissions. The

process of outline writing also helps you create the headings and subheadings that help to organize your work. There are different forms an outline can take, so explore various types and use whichever feels most comfortable.

Fortunately, creating outlines in any common word processing app is easy to do. Various styles are available, so check the *Help* menu or search YouTube for tutorial videos if you are not sure how to go about it. Another great way to generate outlines is via *mind maps*, which were developed in the 1960s by Tony Buzan initially as hand-to-paper thinking tools, but are now primarily done via computer software (Frey, 2007). Modern mind-mapping software apps offer writers a number of usability features that make it easier to explore ideas, integrate your workflow, and even collaborate with colleagues. A quick search for “best mind mapping software” will bring up many options. I can personally vouch for *MindMeister* (www.mindmeister.com), which I have been using for years. Figure 1 shows part of the mind map I used to create this column. Mind-mapping has become a basic part of my writing workflow. It helps me generate ideas, take notes, prioritize, and organize information. When it comes time to write, I just follow my map, and the process becomes much easier.

Figure 1
MindMeister Mind-Map Used Used for This Column



Note: A full-size version of this figure is available in the online version of this article at <https://jalt-publications.org/tlt/departments/writers-workshop>

Rereading the Draft

If you reread your work after setting it aside for a while, you will be able to view it from a fresh perspective. This can help you spot unnoticed errors or make improvements. Reading your paper aloud is also recommended, as is reading out of order, con-

clusion first, introduction last. Building time into your schedule for careful rereading will increase the overall quality of your work.

According to Meacham (2021), reading aloud should be an integral part of the writing process because it makes your work “real,” draws your focus to each word in turn, improves your grammar, and enables you to confront your entire piece as a whole. In the end, reading aloud will help you produce a more engaging paper. A similar approach is to listen to your writing by copying and pasting text into a free text-to-speech website such as *Naturalreaders* (www.naturalreaders.com). This is my preferred technique, as it is an easy and relaxing way to review my progress. Proofreading is quite intensive mentally, so take a break and accomplish this job by sitting back and listening to yourself. Be sure to try out various accents for a bit of fun!

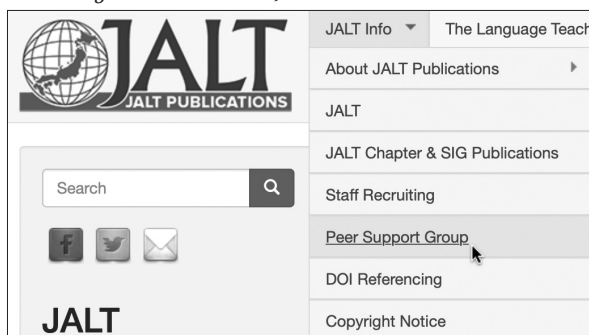
Seeking Help From Colleagues

After you have completed a draft of your paper, ask a colleague or two to read it over to obtain a critical review. Ideally, these readers have already published in your area and can provide some useful feedback via their expertise. English students working on academic writing assignments are also advised to solicit comments from their instructors and classmates.

While the APA advice is strong, I also know it is not always possible to find colleagues with just the right level of expertise, let alone time to help. In fact, it can be quite a chore to find anyone willing to read your work. It is a big ask, after all. What should you do? Well, if you are a JALT member, we have you covered. Simply head over to the *JALT Publications* website (jalt-publications.org) and select *Peer Support Group* (PSG) from the *JALT Info* dropdown menu (Figure 2). From here you will be able to read up on services provided and access a contact page to get in touch with the PSG coordinator. Please include a short self-introduction, some background on your paper, and your desired publishing goals. You should also add the title of your paper and a short abstract if you have one. The coordinator will then find some volunteer reviewers to help you out, and you can work collaboratively from there. Note that PSG services are not only meant for novice writers, nor are they limited to JALT Publications. If you are an experienced author in need of a fresh set of eyes, please consider stopping by, as this service is one of the many benefits of JALT membership.

Figure 2

Accessing the PSG on the JALT Publications Website



Working With Copyeditors and Writing Centers

Novice and non-native-speaking writers can benefit greatly from extra help with their academic writing. It is possible to hire a professional copyeditor to review and proofread your paper before submission. Some universities also have writing centers where such assistance can be found. An experienced copyeditor can help you with idiomatic language use, organization, among other aspects of academic writing. Use of these services is highly recommended, especially if you find yourself struggling to get published. Students also need to be aware of any academic integrity guidelines or policies that determine what levels of assistance are acceptable.

Previously, I suggested getting in touch with the PSG to get help on your academic project. However, with regards to detailed language fixing, a point of clarification is in order (Writers' Peer Support Group, n.d.):

We will help you organize your writing and provide feedback on areas that can use more development, more research[,] or possibly less information. We will not check your grammar and comma usage; in fact, we feel that kind of work, once the paper is to that stage in the process, is better done one-on-one with a trusted friend or colleague. (para 2)

If you are a non-native speaker seeking to publish in English, another idea is to bring on a native speaker as a second author whose primary job is to smoothen out the prose. This would be preferable to asking someone at the last minute to help. Copyediting is a time-consuming task, so at the very least, budget in enough time to give your colleague ample notice.

Revising a Paper

Once you have completed a draft, the revision process can begin in earnest. It takes great mental effort to polish academic writing, so writers will need to plan ahead to have enough time for this important task. Having a plan of what to do can really help. Here are some points to cover as you go over your paper:

- Is the central point clear, and do your arguments flow forth naturally and logically?
- Is the paper well organized?
- For authors seeking publication, does your manuscript fit the journal's style and formatting guidelines?

You will also need to be cognizant of the details. For example, be on the lookout for grammar and usage errors. While the spell and/or grammar checking function on your word processor can assist in dealing with such errors, these programs are not perfect and are no substitute for astute human attention. Also, remember that the APA sections on grammar have been written to focus mainly on the most problematic aspects of usage. For other grammar questions, please consult a trusted reference.

In addition to grammar checking software services such as *Grammarly* (grammarly.com), there are other online tools available that can help. For example, *The Writer's Diet* website (thewritersdiet.com) is a great way to identify unnecessary words that clog up your prose (Talandis Jr., 2020). In addition, in the previous edition of this column, Deutchman (2022) introduced how various corpus-based tools can be used for analyzing texts and improving academic word choice. No matter which tool you use, keep in mind that none of them can truly replace careful attention on your part.

Final Thoughts

The APA 7th Edition manual is more than a simple reference guide on how to cite sources. It is an authoritative collection of academic writing advice that can boost the skills of novice and experienced writers alike. Going deep into this book provides a degree of comfort because it is *the* standard many publications follow, including this one. The writing strategies provided in Chapter 4 are common sense bits of advice that are applicable to a wide range of fields. I hope this column has been able to add to these ideas in useful ways. If you have not picked up your copy yet, I highly recommend you do. It will be a worthwhile investment in your career.

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46.3: Exploring APA—Strategies to Improve Your Writing

