# Practical Writing

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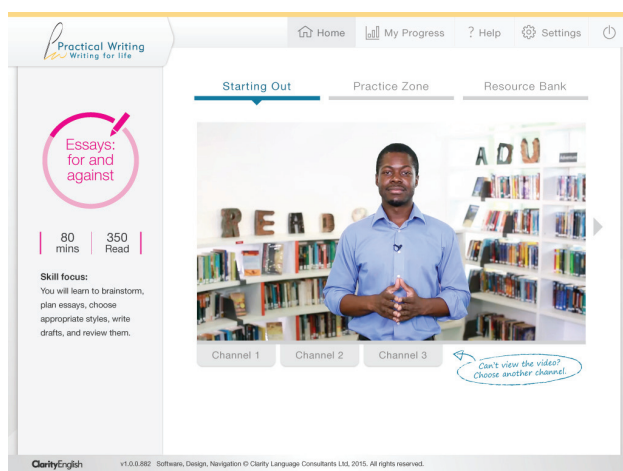
### REVIEWED BY VANESSA TODD

Many learners race through the beginner levels of a new language, only to slow down as they reach intermediate. They can start to feel as if they're trekking across a vast plain with little visible progress, no matter how hard they try. Energy and motivation drop off. After all, why bother trying when effort doesn't seem to get you anywhere? Enter Practical Writing, an online writing course for intermediate-level students. Developed by ClarityEnglish, the course is available to schools and institutions which purchase a licence either to install it on their networked computers (AU$1,905 for up to 40 computers) or to make the program available online or through a learning management system (prices dependent upon the number of users and whether learner activity can be tracked). Practical Writing was shortlisted for the 2017 ELTons (the British Council's Innovation Awards) and should help spark learners' interest in mastering new text types.

The focus of Practical Writing is real-life written genres relevant for living, working and studying in English-speaking contexts. Delivered digitally (cloud-based or on a standalone computer), the course focuses on the skills and structures needed to write academic texts, as well as texts related to professional and personal life. Of the course's 10 modules, nine present a different text type, including argumentative essays, online profiles, text messages and job applications. Plagiarism, while not a text type, is also addressed in a module of its own. Within each module, there is a broad focus on a topic (e.g., the module 'A Short Report' focuses on reviewing hotels and restaurants; the module 'Emails' focuses on asking for information). However, the emphasis of each module, and of the program overall, is on genre – the structure of different text types and their essential grammar and functional language – and writing skills (e.g., planning and proof reading).

In Practical Writing, learning takes place mostly through doing, with the bulk of each module presented via series of activities. Thus, rather than reading long explanations

about a writing skill or the structure of a genre, users learn through activities, such as 'drag and drop', 'find the error', and short answer and multiple-choice questions. These activities also offer learners hints and immediate feedback. Even pages presenting model texts include highlighted text with pop-ups for further explanation, allowing learners to choose if and when they want more information. Each of these learning design choices requires learners to stay focused on the content so that at every step, they're consolidating the skills targeted in the module. Also included in each module is a short video introducing the text type and a 'Resource Bank', where transcripts of the introductory videos, sample answers based on real student texts and PDF worksheets for long-form writing practice are housed. At any time, learners can go to the 'Progress Centre' to check which activities they have completed and see their scores. Depending on their institution's licence, teachers may also be able to access this data for students in their class.



The Practical Writing course is accessible via different platforms with each one housing different types of learning content. This is because during user testing ClarityEnglish discovered, for example, that users preferred not to watch videos on mobile devices as they use up too much data. The digital design thus takes into account where learners are and how much time they have: a few minutes on the bus for practicing vocab using the mobile app, half an hour at a desk for trying out activities on a PC, or a longer session of focused thinking for planning, writing and editing longer texts on the worksheets.

The website is uncluttered with clear, consistent navigation through modules and plenty of white space on each page. Within modules, photographs are used sparingly to set context (e.g., a hotel) or to represent the student writers (from a range of ethnicities) of model texts. While the mobile app was not reviewed, images of the app in Google Play show screens with cute (but thematically unrelated) drawings of robots in similar colourways to the website.

Several choices made in the course design are worth mentioning. Most important is the text types presented. Many of the genres, such as writing a job application,

creating an online profile or writing a review of a hotel, for example, are in themselves cultural constructs, which may challenge learners' cultural expectations. For example, in their own culture, would learners ever review a hotel or any other business in a public forum such as a website? And do cover letters showcase and praise a job applicant's skills? The program might therefore be more or less useful in different teaching and study situations. At the same time, Practical Writing could spark some rich class discussions, leading students to a deeper understanding and appreciation of differing cultural norms and values.

A second design choice worth mentioning is the coverage of grammar. Rather than comprehensively covering a grammatical point such as tenses in the module 'Writing a Short Report', the course encourages learners to consult a specialist grammar resource. This means that the program is not totally stand alone. However, perhaps it is more efficient and effective to send learners to a more complete resource. I suspect that teachers will have different opinions about this.

So, how might Practical Writing fit into the course you teach? Because of the step-by-step, work-at-your-own-pace design of the course and the feedback given on activities, it's perfect for learners to work through independently. It would function well as homework on a General English course (allowing teachers to focus on speaking and listening in class) and also on an Academic English or Business English course (allowing learners to develop knowledge of a wide range of genres). Just note that while most of the activities are self-corrected and model answers are supplied, learners would really benefit from peer and teacher feedback for free response activities. Overall, with a focus on activity and real-life text types and with an intuitive, clean design, Practical Writing should not only foster writing skills but also help students stay motivated.

**Vanessa Todd** is a member of the Learning Skills team at Macquarie University, designing, developing and delivering resources around academic literacies. She is interested in learning design, user experience design and games for learning in higher education. Her current focus is developing online resources supporting at-risk students.

vanessa.todd@mq.edu.au

Twitter: @virtualvt