

**Writing with Passion and Conviction:
Thoughts on Resurrecting Academic Writing in Social Sciences and Humanities**

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I understand this is the 4th Student Research Symposium of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of this university, and your theme for this year is, 'Reading crisis through the lens of Humanities and Social Sciences.' I have seen this kind of focus many times, over the years in large-scale conferences in our country and beyond.

It is an important focus area, particularly at a time when social sciences and humanities are often under-rated and considered soft subjects without any utilitarian value in many countries including ours. It is in this context that we can understand former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's advice to young students that they should be interested in subjects that had a 'demand.' Of course, subjects with a demand understood this way, usually would not include humanities and social sciences, and writing too will not be emphasized in this scheme of things.

But this is a global situation. In many countries, economics have escaped this situation due to its alleged direct implication in what is known as 'development.' And to a certain extent, sociology in countries like ours, have re-invented itself as a mere data-gathering device in a poor simulation of economics at the expense of what once used to be its intellectual creativity.

So, my sense is, the nomenclature and the emphasis in this symposium is perhaps a way in which the Open University or the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences or the students in the faculty have attempted to give an additional pragmatic value to your disciplines by locating them in a discourse of pragmatism, utilitarianism and developmentalism. That is, to give these disciplines a kind of market value.

I agree, what one learns in a university can no longer be purely academic, ethical and idealistic. In addition to these important considerations, what is formally learned also must have professional value within the realities of the existing

market. That is, the market locally as well as globally where employment is available or might offer possibilities.

At the same time, I believe, we also need to move beyond the kind of conventional wisdom that might point us in the direction of a theme like 'Reading crisis through the lens of Humanities and Social Sciences.'

I think we need to think much more broadly but inclusively as well, while also being creative and pragmatic too. But all this needs to be attempted well within your disciplinary domains and out of the box too.

It is in this context, I selected my own theme for today which is, 'Writing with Passion and Conviction: Thoughts on Resurrecting Academic Writing in Social Sciences and Humanities.'

But the idea of writing, though central to all disciplines in social sciences and humanities, has been under-emphasized to the extent of being made almost invisible in academic, professional and popular discourses today.

It is my strong personal belief that academic writing produced in our country in the two languages I am familiar with is of no significant intellectual consequence globally. That is, they will not impact the thinking in humanities and social sciences in the world. I know this is not a popular thing to say. But I say so with confidence and responsibility that comes from my experience is traversing in these worlds for over three decades.

Also, I am sure you know well from your life experiences, if you do not have the command of language and particularly the ability to write, however good your other technical skills might be, the likelihood of you finding it difficult to find employment or being underemployment is high.

But this also depends on your cultural and social capital within your immediate location and the nature of the market in that location and in different parts of the world you want to be in, what the exact language you must have control over and so on.

It is in this specific context that I want to talk to you about two kinds of writing that should be important to all your disciplines. One is **academic writing**, which is in the title of my presentation itself. The other is **creative writing**, which is not in the title, but is crucial, nevertheless.

But I am not thinking of writing as a mere operational and technical tool of communication and expression. Instead, I am thinking of writing as a matter of passion and a product of conviction. Operational command in writing will allow you to get by. But you might still remain ordinary, one among thousands of others who have the same abilities in writing, here and globally.

But if you can master your writing with passion and conviction, if you self-consciously put in the effort that is needed to make this happen, then, you will go beyond the ordinary and excel in your individual fields – given reasonable access to right conditions and networks.

But this does not downgrade the crucial fact that writing at the most fundamental level is a technical skill allowing for communicating effectively through the written word. In this minimum technical sense, writing needs to embrace the following essential components:

- Grammar
- Vocabulary
- Spelling
- Sentence construction
- Structure
- Research and accuracy
- Clarity
- Persuasiveness

Without paying attention to these basic facts, writing cannot be effective whether it is academic or creative writing. **Passion** can help you master these components while **confidence** will follow after you have mastered these.

My argument is, it is due to our collective inability to pay attention to the power of writing both academically and creatively, that we as a country no longer

produce as we should, practitioners in social sciences or humanities of **global** **repute**. If we do, that will be an exception rather than the norm.

Until the mid-1970s this was possible with regard to academic writing in social sciences as well as humanities. For instance, it is through the excellence in their writings that writers in Sri Lankan social sciences like professors Gananath Obeyesekere and Stanley Tambiah and writers in humanities like Professors Ediriweera Saratchandra, Siri Gunasinghe and Mr Martin Wickramasinghe received global recognition.

But it should be noted that the creative works of the latter three were mostly in Sinhala. All three were nevertheless capable of expressing their ideas to global readers in English through their own scholarly writing and some of their local works in Sinhala were renowned enough to be translated into English and other culturally and socially powerful languages. This was clearly the case with Martin Wickramasinghe.

So, when I am talking **about passion and conviction** in writing, I am not making a simplistic reference to English language writing alone as often happens in our country given that language's global political and cultural dominance. My point is, our writing – be that academic or creative writing or be that in English, Sinhala or Tamil – must be good enough to capture the attention of the world and be noticed. And this can only come via writing, invested with passion and confidence.

And if we write well in Sinhala or Tamil, then we have to find ways to take these to the world through globally dominant languages. That is, through viable translations. This is how writings in languages that vary from Italian to Spanish and Turkish to Chinese and Japanese have traveled to the world from their own original and restricted language domains.

However, **passion and conviction** in writing or any other professional domain of knowledge cannot be taught in universities. Universities, particularly at undergraduate level, are only places meant to offer basic training. They can, however, encourage and create enabling spaces to ensure that basic training is further fine-tuned by receivers of knowledge in these places.

That is, students and even teachers. But the actual and professional fine-tuning of writing with passion and conviction must necessarily come from practice to begin with and competition with others both in this country and beyond. So excelling is an individual effort and cannot be something collective or institutional.

This brings to my mind Stephen King's words expressed in his book, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*: "If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut."

But then again, to go in such directions, institutions, which in our case are universities, government or private programs that encourage excellence in writing can play a crucial role by introducing our writers to global or regional networks through which their writing can hopefully cross international as well as linguistic borders. I am not only thinking of creative writing when I say this. I also have in mind technical writing – from software development to military strategy – if we produce good enough writing in specific technical fields that the world might find useful.

This is where our country has serious problems. I don't see our universities or too many institutions beyond universities providing access to writers to excel in their craft. In academia, giving extremely naïve recognitions such as awards for the 'best paper' at the end of many conferences for average writing will simply not be good enough.

Personally, I have never received such an award. But my academic writing has crossed many borders, curricular, institutions and languages. Not having a competitive system of university presses or similar publishing operations in our country to take our writing to the world or to produce the most competitive writing locally, does not help too.

So, you will graduate with or without your skills in writing in the conditions I just outlined. These conditions both globally and locally are not particularly helpful and the times we live in are exceptionally difficult everywhere.

When I talk about writing produced with passion and conviction, I am not simply thinking about writing that will produce texts for leisure. I am also thinking about the broader local and global markets in which writing would be a conduit for being noticed in a competitive world and a means of employment.

I hope you will find what I said at least marginally useful as you prepare for your journeys in the world of employment, competition and corruption into which you will step in soon, which you must have at least partially already experienced.

I wish you all the best.