This chapter sets out to define the role of academic writing in English in the context of universities across Europe, in order to help teachers working in those contexts understand what type of texts their students need to write and what problems they may have. Just for the sake of clarity, it is necessary to state at the outset that writing in English for academic purposes is not the same everywhere, and that the model of writing current in US, British or Australian universities is not necessarily applicable in their European counterparts. Moreover, even if some British or American model were the undisputed goal of academic writing courses, language issues and cultural factors would mean that the way in which such a model could be taught in Europe would be different from the way in which it might best be taught in Britain or the USA.

So let us look first at the question as to what students need to write in English in European universities. The answer is by no means straightforward. There is no such thing as academic writing in general, and there are many rival definitions, of what academic writing is and how it should be done. All academic writing is discipline-specific, and is also influenced by the educational and academic culture of the country in which it is being written. Psychology students do not write the same kind of papers as literature students, and German students of literature do not write the same type of paper as English students of literature. Moreover, even in the same country and subject area, there are different expectations according to the educational level. Undergraduates are usually expected to write in one way, whereas graduate students are supposed to write in another. To add to the confusion, virtually none of the real assignments set in real universities bears a very strong resemblance to the kind of essay or report that is often billed as “academic writing” in textbooks.

This chapter will look first at the kind of academic writing that is often presented in textbooks for the international market which are heavily influenced by US and UK examination practices. It will then consider the range of teaching material on academic writing that is focused more broadly to prepare students to cope with real academic writing tasks in US or British universities. The merits of these two types of teaching material will be assessed, and some criticisms made. This will be followed by a discussion of...
the practice of academic writing in English at universities in Europe, and the role of the writing teacher in this complex scenario. Issues such as the national educational culture and the rhetorical tradition within different curricular areas will be discussed in this context. The final part of the chapter will set out a framework for genre analysis that will enable teachers to define what kind of text students should learn to write in different situations.

Academic writing textbooks

A considerable number of textbooks and teaching methods exist which purport to provide material for teaching academic writing. Many of these are designed for international students preparing to take examinations such as IELTS or TOEFL, which are often used as entrance criteria for universities in English-speaking countries. These books focus heavily on the writing tasks for these exams, which are designed to encapsulate some essential features of academic writing, but which are heavily constrained by the examination format. To take one example, TOEFL requires students to complete two pieces of writing which represent different aspects of the type of writing assignment that students may need to produce across the curriculum in US universities. The first of these is an “integrated writing task”, which consists of a text to be read, a sound file on a related topic, and then a prompt which usually asks the student to compare some aspect of what he/she has heard with what he/she has read. This task is designed to incorporate some essential academic skills (synthesis, making comparisons, arguing on the basis of evidence). However, the length of the text to be produced is around 220 words, which hardly makes it representative of any real academic assignment. The length of the source material makes this even less representative: the text to be read is less than 300 words in length, and the sound file lasts about two minutes. Of course, in an examination situation, it is not possible to ask a student to read large amounts of material or listen to a course of lectures. More importantly, since the exam has to be taken by students from a vast range of disciplines, it cannot ask students to draw on specific kinds of conceptual knowledge or integrate new information with what they already know. This means that although this “integrated task” simulates some aspects of real-world academic writing, it fails to incorporate other complex aspects that are often even more challenging for students.

The second TOEFL writing task is a 30-minute essay, the essay being traditionally thought to epitomise the kind of argumentative writing skills needed for longer written assignments. It is true that essays require students to organise text, select and arrange information, construct paragraphs, use reasons and examples to support ideas, and in general constitute a microcosm of what argumentative writing is all about. However, it is equally apparent that they do not truly resemble real-world academic writing tasks, simply