5.1 Introduction

Academic writing is a form of ‘writing in the workplace’. It is a social and communal activity which is shaped by the needs and aims of academia as a social domain and an institutional organisation. This includes the approach to work and the organisational structure of the academic community in general, as well as the subjects, interests and methods of the individual disciplines (cf. Bazerman, 1988; Bazerman & Paradis, 1991; Swales, 1990; Vipond, 1993). In short, academic writing can be characterised as a typified activity in a typified situation.

As in many other writing domains, the area of academic writing is being increasingly influenced by electronic media. These media now form a permanent part of the daily professional work of academics as a tool for gaining access to, and communicating, specialist information. Exactly how the use of electronic media affects the production process and the final result of academic writing has to this date not been thoroughly examined (cf. Haas, 1987; Hill et al., 1991; Jakobs & Knorr, 1995). This is also generally the case for the area of gaining access to specialist information to be used in the process of academic writing (cf. Riehm et al., 1992) and related problems (cf. Kolb & Winter, 1995).

The use of external sources of information, such as the specialist text, is one of the characteristics of academic writing. But, in fact, existing writing models pay little attention to information retrieval from external sources (cf. de Beaugrande, 1984; Grabowski, 1995; Hayes & Flower, 1980; Herrmann & Hoppe-Graf, 1989). The existing models are limited to situations in which writers primarily use their own internal knowledge (from long-term memory). However, more recent studies show that, in many situations, writers are dependent on information from external sources (cf. Eigler et al., 1990; Keseling, 1993; van der Geest, this volume).

In this paper, we intend to discuss what methods academic authors use to gain access to specialist information and to what extent electronic media help them to do this. Our discussion will be based on theoretical assumptions about academic writing and about the value of specialist literature for this process (Part 2), as well as on two surveys in which German academics participated (Parts 3 and 4).
5.2 Writing in Academia

The characteristics of academic writing are primarily shaped by the needs and aims of the modern academy as a social domain and institution. This institution serves not only to increase our common knowledge of the world, but also to create communities and build traditions.

Written forms of expression, particularly published texts, play an important role in this context. They are still considered the most important source available for the acquisition of knowledge and the transfer of ideas and research results within the academic community. Only what has been offered for open discussion within the academy and has been accepted is deemed to be 'common' knowledge. The development of knowledge is characterised by a permanent process of reading and interpretation, acquisition, evaluation, discussion, developing and passing on concepts and data and forming convictions and personal views. Academics are not only strictly obliged to produce publications, but also continually to take up, study and interpret the research work of other academics and to comment critically upon it in their own work (Weinrich, 1994). The process of retrieving, studying and interpreting texts thus forms an obligatory part of academic writing.

The process of acquiring, reworking and passing on knowledge in the shape of a text is significantly influenced by the norms, expectations and forms of interaction within the academic community. Academic writing, like other kinds of professional writing, is integrated into a network of social relationships (cf. Bazerman, 1988; Spilka, 1988; Winsor, 1989, p. 271). Academic texts are thus, as a rule, addressed to more than one group of people. These texts address colleagues in the same specialist field in their capacity as authors of publications, as critics or as colleagues to be convinced of the writer’s ideas, as experts or as editors.

For this reason, academic writing cannot be limited to the transfer of assumptions, ideas or facts. It also constitutes an important form of social interaction within the academic community. In both areas of interaction, academic and social, references made in specialist texts to other texts serve many purposes. They do not just serve to build a network of research results and to show the author’s background knowledge (cf. Bazerman, 1988); they also help determine relationships.

The use of other people’s words or ideas in text is often a way of establishing alliances or oppositions with individual readers or groups. Attribution, use of quotations, and referencing are all methods of establishing, altering, and maintaining relationships within discourse communities. When, in academic discourse, we use another’s criticism of a community member, rather than being critical ourselves, we often do so to preserve our relationships. (Paré, 1991, pp. 54–5).

While there are a number of studies available on what motivates writers to make references to specialist literature (cf. Cronin, 1984; Jakobs, in press; Swales, 1990), there is a lack of studies concerning how other people’s texts are used in the writing process (cf. Jakobs, 1995).

In this paper, it is assumed that the activity of searching for specialist literature as well as managing and processing such literature is mainly determined by interests that arise from the subjective and objective needs and aims of academic writing. These include constraints set by the writing task itself.

Further constraints arise from the individual stages of work which go into a text, its stage of development and the author’s personal preferences. Let us explain this briefly.