

Study Advice Services

Part of the IfL Centre for Learning Development

Academic Writing

One of the objects of any University education is to enable successful students to express themselves well. One of the complaints made by University teachers about students is that 'They can't write English!' One of the complaints made against teachers is that 'They don't teach us how to write English!'

Hull University now has a Service designed to make this deficiency good. Go to the website <http://www.hull.ac.uk/studyadvice> for details of how to consult an academic writing tutor on either the Hull or Scarborough campus and to see what other leaflets are available.

A personal consultation – if it is available to you – is the better choice, because writing is a personal matter, in several senses.

- Style is the expression of personality. (The French writer Buffon said, *le style est l'homme même*: style is the man himself. ¹) All mature writers have their own – recognisable – way of saying things.
- Thought and expression are inseparable. What you think controls how you say it; and only you think in your way.
- One purpose of academic writing is to explore new thoughts, and therefore new expressions. The act of writing – of exploring – helps you to think. ("How can I know what I think till I read what I have written?" ²)
- Each academic subject develops its own way of writing, to deal with its own special demands.
- Written style is a matter of taste. Some of my academic colleagues will disagree with some of the advice in this leaflet – and others will agree.

So I believe that one cannot be taught how to write – one can only learn. Teachers, tutors and other coaches can guide and help you; but the central truth is that you will evolve and develop your own ability to write.

Having said that, I now offer you some guidance and help. In academic writing, you must strike a balance between being personal in your style (and individual in your thought) and following the conventions of academic writing. For there are rules.

¹ *Discours sur le style*, 1753

² This quotation – which I originally knew in the form given – supplies an object lesson in research. *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* ascribes it to Graham Wallas (1858-1932), in *The Art of Thought* (1926). Here it is in the form "The little girl had the making of a philosopher in her who, being told to make sure of her meaning before she spoke, said: 'How can I know what I think till I see what I say?'" While trying to check this through the World Wide Web, I found it also ascribed to E. M. Forster, E. M. Forester, and E. M. Forrester – all on University websites, none dated or sourced (the famous writer was E. M. FORSTER); Weick, 1979; Mark Twain; Raymond Carver; W. H. Auden; Gertrude Stein; and, among other more anonymous sources, "a proverb I once heard quoted by a Soviet dissident", "One writer", "the lady", "the unknown thinker", "My mother" and an "old Irish proverb". It is no longer a priority of mine to establish the original. Note that research, like other activities, involves a balance between effort and reward!

First I will give six general principles. Then there will be a miscellaneous collection of more detailed advice about 'good' writing in academic circles.

1 General Principles

1. First, observe your models. In academic work, you will be constantly reading. The academic texts that you read are written in the sort of style in which you should be writing. I believe that style develops chiefly through mimicry. Imitate your texts. Imitate your teachers. You will hear it said – as a criticism – that someone “talks like a book.” That is a fair criticism of spoken language. But, when in doubt about your written style, do try to “write like a book.”
2. Secondly, consider your readers. All writers should do this. In the case of students, imagine your Supervisor or Lecturer reading your assignment. Is it going to please or impress her or him? (Even more basically, will he or she understand it?)

(Don't forget that although you are writing 'to be read', you have another purpose: to show that you deserve a degree. So you should also ask yourself “Is this assignment going to say ‘Look how clever I am; look how much I know?’” – always bearing in mind that this knowledge should be relevant to the job in hand.)

3. Thirdly, aim to sound like an authority. Your personal opinion does not matter in the course of academic studies – except when it is demanded by the nature of the assignment given, and the subject you are studying. In Literature or Music, for example, it may be appropriate at times to give an account of one's own responses; and if you are to 'reflect on' your experience or learning, then your personal experience is unavoidable – indeed, it is the point of your assignment. The danger here, of course, is that you may not be an authority. Undergraduates – particularly in their first year – risk sounding pompous (and/or wrong) if they claim too much. But your aim must be to write as if what you are saying is the truth – because it is the truth, i.e. factual and provable. If it is not factual and provable, you must admit that this is the case.
4. This is where the fourth point arises. Academic writing is careful to include doubts and limitations. Carefully chosen examples of ideas that disagree with what you are saying, or expressions of why you are not telling the whole truth, are part and parcel of academic evidence. Phrases like “for the purposes of this essay, the limited definition of ... will be used” and “the examples used in this short essay are limited to...” also make an academic point.
5. Fifthly, you should be careful to support everything you say with evidence. In real life, of course, this is impossible – and unnecessary: you do not need to explain what 'gold' is, or who Shakespeare was. Once again, there is a question of balance in writing. In all subjects, there is a point of balance between what you should explain and what you should assume your reader knows.

(This balance changes with the level of study, of course. The whole point of a first year assignment might be to demonstrate that the student understands the thinking behind a concept; but a postgraduate Dissertation might take the same concept for granted, and not explain it at all.)

6. Here we come to the vexed question of referencing.³ At first sight, this is an obvious difference between academic and other kinds of writing. Very few novels have any notes; very few academic texts are without them. When you write an academic assignment, be sure you have a source for every important fact or idea that you use. Then make sure that the assessor can check that source, by saying where you find it. It is very irritating to a busy marker to have to check a fact without knowing where to check it. If you have absorbed my second point above, about audience, you will realise that it is unwise to irritate your assessor.

³See the Study Advice Services leaflet for some general advice.

2 Miscellaneous Tips and Details

- Write in the third person ('it', 'he', 'they' etc.). Avoid the **first person** ('I', 'me', 'my' etc.) – particularly in the singular. Equally, the use of the **second person** ('you', etc) is to be avoided.⁴

If your assignment is to write a reflective piece of work, or some sort of account of your own experience, of course, ignore this advice. As always, writers must make their own decisions.

- Don't give orders – don't write in the **imperative mood** - unless you are training to be a teacher.⁵
- Avoid the use of questions. You may know the answer: does your reader? It's much safer to tell her, or him. Or them.⁶
- Do not become entangled in the problems of 'sexist' language. It is much easier to write in the plural. "Students should check their work" is good English. "A student should check - " is also good English, but now the problems begin: "- her work"? "- his work"? Which? You can write "his or her", but that seems clumsy. Stick to the plural.
- If you must refer to yourself, third person formulae such as "**The present writer** would recommend that..." may be useful.
- Use the full forms of words and phrases, not contractions like "he's", "don't", etc. Keep the apostrophe to indicate possession – and use it correctly. Academics really sneer at students who use the "Greengrocer's apostrophe".⁷
- Use words with precision.
- Use as few words as you can; but use enough words to express your meaning as fully as you can. Your judgement of what is appropriate here is part of what you should learn throughout your course.
- Avoid lazy words such as 'nice'. It is usually better to say "acquire" or "obtain" than "get"; and it may be better, if you mean 'through the use of money', to say "purchase" or – better still – "buy".
- A short word like "buy" is better than a long one like "purchase" – unless the long one is more accurate. A "statutory instrument" is better than a "rule" – to a lawyer, at any rate.
- Proof-read with care. Ask someone else to help – you may be too close to your work to be able to see your mistakes.
- Write in complete sentences, preferably grammatically correct.
- You will often sound more academic if you include doubts in your work – and qualifications. "Within the scope of this essay, the current writer cannot hope to cover all the possible implications of the question."
- In this context, the use of **litotes** sounds very academic. This is the construction where a writer uses a **negative** with a negative adjective, e.g. "It is not unlikely that..." This does not mean the same as "It is probable that...". It has a shade of meaning and qualification that can be useful to academic writers.
- If in doubt, choose the more formal, or possibly just the more old-fashioned, of two words. For example, say **quotation** rather than **quote** whenever you mean the use of somebody else's words.

⁴ I use the 2nd person in this Guide because it is NOT a piece of academic writing. For the same reason, 'the present writer judges it acceptable to use the 1st person in this footnote'.

⁵ The current Guide aims to teach students. So it gives many orders.

⁶ Don't write in incomplete sentences like this.

⁷ This is a good example of academic snobbery. Greengrocers are not the only people capable of using apostrophes simply (and wrongly) to show the plural. But "Tomato's" and "pot's" are not uncommon...

- Develop an academic vocabulary. The ‘long words’ you learn in the course of your studies are long usually because they have more precise meanings than their less formal equivalents. They are therefore better when you want to be accurate. (Also they allow you to sound like someone who deserves a degree.)
- Do not, however, despise short, workmanlike and effective plain English words. If they mean what you want to say. Accurately.
- Avoid the use of humour in academic writing – unless you are very sure of yourself.
- Even when you are not being funny, avoid the use of irony or sarcasm.
- Paragraphs in academic English should contain more than one sentence. (Short paragraphs look as if you are writing for a tabloid newspaper - or a simple Guide!) I guess that the average academic book runs to two or three paragraphs per page. Look at the books in your subject, and get a feel for how long your own paragraphs should be when you are imitating the academic style.
- Use the word **that** more in formal writing than most of us do in speech - particularly after such **verbs of utterance** as to **say**, to **report**, to **think** etc. It can help to make your writing much clearer.
- When you use abbreviations, other than the conventional ones like “e.g.”, “et al.” etc., write out the formal title in full the first time you use it; and put the abbreviation in brackets after it, for example “the meeting in Cabinet Office Briefing Room A (COBRA).” After that, you can use the abbreviation throughout the essay – “there was a COBRA meeting again the following week.”

Once again, you have to exercise judgement. In Media Studies there is no need to explain what “BBC” means. But if you are writing a business report for foreign readers, it might be sensible to say what E.C.G.D. stands for.⁸

~~Finally, to prove that I can write some academic English, a quote. —~~

Finally, the writer will attempt to demonstrate his command of the academic style by using a quotation. When he gave his six rules of style, George Orwell finished with “Break any of these rules rather than say anything outright barbarous”.⁹

The same applies to anything in this leaflet.

⁸ I wish I knew.

⁹ ‘Orwell, George’ (Blair, Eric) *Politics and the English Language* 1946, reprinted in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus. London: Secker and Warburg, 1968

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All web addresses in this leaflet were correct at the time of publication.

The information in this leaflet can be made available in an alternative format on request from Sue Hodgson, telephone 01482 466199.