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Practical introduction to academic writing

1 Motivation

Academic writing is, as it were, a recursive process. First you need to write good sentences. Then good arguments. Then good paragraphs. Then good essays. Then good papers. The tools used at each step are more or less the same but the extension and subtlety increases. In this short and practical guide we introduce basic tools and recipes you need to employ every time you prepare an academic opdracht. As in cooking, the recipe is not the meal. You improve your (academic) writing when you practice.

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2 Argumentative text and academic writing

Writing is a skill, that is, you need to train in order to learn. A general feature of argumentative writing for academic purposes is that you should be mindful of the AUDIENCE, TONE and PURPOSE that are specific to these genre.

Who is your audience? You may think that your audience are your teachers, for they are those who will in fact read the text. This is partly true and partly not: if you were to take that assumption too far, you could run the risk of understating concepts and ideas in your text, by thinking that those who write the opdrachten should surely know what an answer will say. In fact, you should have a target audience of an imaginary student to whom you are explaining what you think. You want this colleague to be *persuaded*, and persuasion is the

goal of argumentation. Your colleague will be persuaded only if he understands what the problem is and what your arguments show. So you need to be mindful of putting all the pieces in the puzzle so that your colleague gets convinced.

What is the appropriate tone? Academic writing is formal in tone. If you you would try to convince a friend to go to a pub with you by texting him on the phone, using slang and abbreviations is the way to go. That is *not* the way to go in academic writing. A formal tone allows you and the reader to focus on the subject matter of the text. An informal tone tells more about you than about your knowledge of a subject matter, and academic writing is not the arena where to show your personal wit.

The purpose of the text depends on the task at hand. This may be to motivate, explain, define, argue, attack or defend, compare and contrast, etc. The purpose of a text — a short paragraph, an essay, or a paper — determines its structure. At every stage in writing, we urge you to be explictly aware of the structure you choose for your text.

2.1 Writing paragraphs

We consider how to write different sorts of PARAGRAPHS. In all cases, the following basic steps apply: outline claim and support, develop, add transition signals, revise, and proofread.

Structure: claim + support

The claim is the core message of the paragraph. It is given in the TOPIC SENTENCE, which typically opens a paragraph. We then provide support the claim, or we explain it further by breaking it down into subclaims. A concluding sentence simply recapitulates what has been said in a brief way and it possibly announces what comes in the following paragraph. Here is a scheme:

- Topic sentence
- Sentences A, B, C providing support or explanation of the topic sentence.
- Concluding sentence

For instance, consider these two paragraphs:

> PARAGRAPH 1: A major problem in Amsterdam is the overabundance of bikes. Abandoned bikes block sidewalks and emergency doors, which leads to nuisance and to dangerous situations in case of emergency. Short term but also sustainable solutions are needed.

This paragraph introduces a problem. The first sentence says what the problem is. The second one explains why it is a problem. The third one suggests what the following paragraph(s) will be dealing with.

> PARAGRAPH 2: A major problem in Amsterdam is the overabundance of bikes and the Gemeente Amsterdam has opened a call for short-term solutions to deal with it. In this essay, we will provide two strategies solutions: the creation of the "recycling patrol" and the enforcement of bike tagging. We conclude that if combined, these solutions have a chance of impact in 3-6 months.

This paragraph is the introduction to an essay. The first sentence identifies the subject of the essay. The rest analyses the structure of the essay.

Outlining and developing

The way to proceed to write a paragraph is to first have a clear idea of what's the task to be achieved, and to OUTLINE your ideas on that basis. An outline is a plan for a paragraph where you write down the claim its warrant or subclaims in the order in which you plan to write them. You may think that an outline is a waste of time because it's just like writing a paragraph. Well, if you write the outline, indeed you are almost done with writing a paragraph. So start there! For example, this is an outline for paragraph 1:

- Problem: overabundance of bikes in Amsterdam.
- Why: nuisance and dangers of congested sidewalks and blocked emergency doors
- What's next: short term and sustainable solutions

Then you can go on and fill in the details to convert this into paragraph 1.

Transition signals

A key to writing a good paragraph is to give it a clear structure and then use transition signals in order to enhance its coherence and readability. Connectors and other transition words are the oil for the mechanism. Here's just one list (from Oshima & Hogue 1991), you can find zillions of them in academic writing books or sites.

- To indicate sequence or to order information: first, second etc., followed by, at this point, next, last, finally, previously, subsequently, after that, initially, and then, next, before, after, concurrently, simultaneously, meanwhile.
- To introduce an example: in this case, for example, for instance, on this occasion, to illustrate, to demonstrate, this can be seen, when/where..., take the case of,
- To indicate time: immediately, thereafter, formerly, finally, prior to, previously, then, soon, during, at that time, before, after, at this point.

- To divide an idea: first, next, finally; firstly, secondly, thirdly, initially, subsequently, ultimately;
- To compare and/ or contrast: similarly, by comparison, similar to, like, just like; whereas, balanced against. In contrast, on the other hand, balanced against, however, on the contrary, unlike, differing from, a different view is, despite,
- To introduce an opposite idea or show exception: however, on the other hand, whereas, instead, while, yet, but, despite, in spite of, nevertheless, even though, in contrast, it could also be said that
- To introduce additional ideas/ information: in addition, also, finally, moreover, furthermore, one can also say, and then, further, another,
- To indicate a result/ cause of something: therefore, thus, consequently, as a consequence, as a result, hence.

Revising

In academic writing there is no fast track. To do it well, you need to re-read what you write. This can sometimes be painfully annoying but it is a basic and unavoidable stage of the process. When you revise, you check for:

- Task achievement. Have you done what you were asked to do?
- Clarity of structure. Is it easy to see what you want to say and why?
- Coherence and cohesion. Have you properly articulated your claim and its support?
- Level of detail. Have you said enough? too much?
- Appropriateness of transition signals.
- Adequate conclusion (does not add anything new but does not repeat previous sentences)

Proofreading

You are expected to proofread before you submit any opdracht. Effective proofreading is done with a pencil (analogical or digital, if you have a tablet) because that way you can add, change, move, and cross out on a given basis. If you just make changes instead of printing out on paper or on a PDF what you write, you may gain a bit of time but the result is usually worse than when you have the text as you once wrote it in front of you and you are faced with it. You have to do this no matter which language you write in! You have to check for:

- Completeness and correctness of sentences.

- Precision in vocabulary.
- Punctuation, spelling, capitalisation, typos, etc.

With this general overview on how to write a paragraph, we now move to some specific sorts of paragraphs you will be required to write in the opdrachten.

2.1.1 Motivated answers

What's the difference between an answer and a motivated one? You could say that the former is a sentence while the latter is a paragraph. When you answer a question, you make a claim. When you provide motivation, you explain your claim and you argue for it.

For example, if the question were: "what's the best way to get from Science Park to Amsterdam Centraal?", you could answer "Take the train." This kind of short answer is quite inappropriate in academic writing. Even if you think it's redundant, you would be expected to write your answer as a self-standing claim (i.e., one that a reader can understand even if she did not read the original question), so an acceptable answer could be: "The best way to get from Science Park to Amsterdam Centraal is to take a train at the stop which is right next to the campus."

Still, here we are just giving an answer and no motivation (you, for instance, may think that actually taking a train is not the best way to get to Centraal). For this, we need to say why we consider it the best way. This additional sentences could help: "There is a direct train every 10 minutes, the train ride to Centraal only takes 10 minutes, and the ticket just costs 2,10 EUR."

You could maybe be unsatisfied because none of those reasons suffices to establish that taking a train is the *best* way. Maybe one needs to be more careful and qualify the claim in the topic sentence, to explain in what sense we think our answer is the offers the best solution. For instance:

> The best way to get from Science Park to Amsterdam Centraal, when thinking of least time and effort, is to take a train at the stop which is right next to the campus. There is a direct train every 10 minutes, the train ride to Centraal only takes 10 minutes, and the ticket just costs 2,10 EUR.

This is a clear and motivated answer. You may still disagree but you can see why think my claim should be accepted.

Of course, when you try to justify, for instance, why a certain statement lacks a truth value, explanations and reasons are harder to give. Here we are giving you a recipe, not an answer-generator.

2.1.2 Providing definitions

When you are asked to provide a definition, you may not just transcribe the relevant passage from the book or text you are reading. Paraphrasing is a very

useful tool here. In a paraphrase, you provide your own rendition or understanding of the concepts at hand, which requires you to grasp the meaning of the original definition. You should be careful in properly documenting the source(s) you rely on when constructing your paraphrase. Unreferenced paraphrase is in the fringes of plagiarism! (See more on plagiarism below in section **??**.

Here is a simple recipe to paraphrase:

- Read and re-read the definition in the context in which it appears.
- Write down on a piece of papers the main technical terms appearing in the *definiendum* (what is being defined) and in the *definiens* (the cluster of notions by which the *definiendum* is defined).
- Add arrows to turn it into a directed graph and/or link the terms with transition signals (simple logical functors can help but usually it's better to use natural language ones to specify cause, effect, oppositions, alternatives, etc.)
- Prepare an outline in which you distinguish definiendum and definiens.
- Write the paraphrase in a paragraph.

2.1.3 Give arguments

When you are asked to establish, support, or reject a position, you are expected to give arguments. What are arguments? You have read and heard already that one can classify arguments into different classes: deductive, inductive, transcendental, etc. There are of course many other kinds of argument: by analogy, from charity, etc. Here we consider the issue more generally: what do these and possibly other kinds of argument have in common? They all share this general conditional structure: a claim is established by providing true premises and a reasoning method to pass from premises to conclusion:

- There is a conclusion, a claim one wants to put forth, something that others should come to agree with.
- There are premises, data, evidence, or reasons in support for the claim.
- There is a reasoning or warrant that allows us infer the conclusions from the premises.

Because an argument is a set of claims, an argument cannot be true or false: claims are true or false. An argument is valid if the reasoning guarantees that from true premises you get to a true conclusion. The argument is sound if, besides being valid, it is also the case that its premises are actually true.

In your opdrachten, you should construct arguments without thinking too much about the type of argument you're constructing (unless explicitly indicated). That is, don't try to decide first what kind of argument you will use.

Focus on giving a clear formulation to the claim you want to make, to see which premises and reasoning would take you there.

Here is a simple recipe to structure an argumentative paragraph:

- Formulate the conclusion as a topic sentence.
- Work out what is assumed by these claims, i.e., what's the data that you need to accept to believe that.
- Make the reasoning from assumptions to conclusions explicit: does the conclusion hold as a special case of the premises? does it follow by analogy? is the conclusion the best explanation for the premises? etc.
- Anticipate possible objections — what could your rival say to undermine your argument? — and counterargue them.

Writing an argument which includes the anticipation of counterarguments may take more than one paragraph. The basics described at the beginning of section 2.1 (outline claim and support, develop, add transition signals, revise, proofread) all apply to the new paragaphs you may need.

You have to realise that to attack an argument, just claiming that the conclusion is false is insufficient. Here are a few ideas on how to attack an argument:

- Attack validity. Argue against the reasoning method that takes from premises to conclusion.
- Attack soundness. Argue against the truth of the premises.
- Reductio. Show that a contradiction follows if one accepts the conclusion.

To defend an argument (your own or somebody else's), here are a few ideas:

- Defend validity. Argue for the correctness of the reasoning method that takes from premises to conclusion.
- Defend soundness. Show that if one considers that one or more premises are not true, then a contradiction follows.
- Reductio. Show that a contradiction follows if one accepts the negation of the conclusion.

2.1.4 Compare and contrast

When you compare and contrast two positions or ideas, you need to be clear about what of those positions you are interested in, define aspects with respect to which you will compare and contrast, and formulate a thesis that summarises your observations.

Here is a recipe for comparing and contrasting:

- Summarise the key features of the two ideas you have to relate.

- Define aspects in which you will relate them (in e.g., a Venn diagram or a table) and fill in how each position stands with respect to each aspect you defined.
- Write a topic sentence in which you summarise your observations. The rest of the paragraph should develop the comparison and contrast by developing in text what you have in your scheme or table.

2.2 Essays and papers

Now that you are familiar with writing paragraphs of different sorts, we move one level up. An ESSAY consists of several paragraphs. Like a paragraph, it is written about one topic, but the topic's development requires paragraphs rather than just a few sentences: it's longer. But the organisation of the essay is essentially the same as the paragraph's, so if you can write a paragraph as we have analysed it above, you can write an essay. Here is a reminder of the structure of a paragraph:

- Topic sentence
- Support A
- Support B
- Support C
- Concluding sentence

The general structure of an essay or a paper is as follows:

1. Introductory paragraph or section:
    - State the topic of the essay.
    - Give background information.
    - Declare the goal: what question do you want to address.
    - Thesis statement: the answer to the question developed in the essay.
    - Methodological outline.
2. Body:
    - A: Topic sentence
    - Support
    - Concluding sentence
    - B: Topic sentence
    - Support

- Concluding sentence
- C: Topic sentence
- Support
- Concluding sentence

3. Conclusion: restatement or summary of the main points, final comments.
4. References

A PAPER is like an essay, but longer. So when you write an essay, it is optional to explicitly signal where your introduction, body, and conclusion start, but this is needed when you write a paper. Furthermore, each module in the body of a paper should be made into a new section identified with a heading. It is salutary to construct each of the body sections as a mini-essay, i.e., to start with an introductory paragraph where you explain what you're going to do in that section and why. Then you get to do it. Finally, you conclude it by wrapping it up and announcing what comes next in following section.

The basics for writing a paragraph described at the beginning of section 2.1 (outline, develop, add transition signals, revise, proofread) all apply when you write an essay or paper. Here are a few further indications.

2.2.1 Question, bibliographic search, thesis statement

The goal of an academic essay or paper is to answer a well-crafted QUESTION. To ask a good question, you don't need to have the answer — this is what research is about! — but you need to think whether an answer can be found within the limits of time and space you have. You therefore have to *narrow down* the initial question in order for it to be tractable in a short essay (1500 words), a long essay (2500 words), or a paper (3500 words).

When you answer questions in an opdracht, the bibliographic sources are normally those defined in the opdracht itself. When you write a longer piece like an essay or paper, you sometimes need to make a bibliographic search: to find and select literature that is pertinent in the search for an answer to the narrowed down question. An ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY is an alphabetically ordered list of sources in which you not only properly record the bibliographic references (more on this below), but you also include one or two sentences that summarise what a source is about and why it is relevant for your question. A bibliographic search has to be *strongly selective*. There is a lot written out there; a paper which relies on irrelevant sources or on too many sources is almost always a bad paper. Narrowing down your question properly is crucial in order to delimit the boundaries of your bibliography. In the context of this course, essays will have a pre-defined bibliography of at most two sources, and you will be expected to construct an annotated bibliography of at most 3-4 sources.

The THESIS STATEMENT is the core of the introduction. There you make explicit what claim and subclaims are going to be argued for in the essay or

paper. The claim is your hypothesis, a possible answer to the narrowed down question. In the essay, you state and explain your hypothesis, and you provide support for it. The bibliographic search of course partly depends on the thesis you want to defend, but your thesis should be your own creation, you should not draw it from a source.

Schematically, then, these are the basic ingredients of an essay or paper:

- Question and narrowing down.
- Annotated bibliographic search.
- Thesis statement.

2.2.2 Outlining

The METHODOLOGICAL OUTLINE in the introduction is a summary of the essay's or paper's outline. An outline is *essential* when you write an essay or paper. This is how you succeed in writing a clearly structured, coherent and cohesive piece. Like when you write a paragraph outline, an essay or paper outline is a scheme in which you decide the order in which you introduce claims and support for them, the organisation of the piece in paragraphs (for the essay) and in sections (for a long essay and a paper). Work on your outline until you get a smooth structure in order to give support to your thesis, and to plan the body of the piece so that its parts are well-articulated and balanced in terms of depth/extension. You find a scheme for an essay or a paper above at the beginning of section 2.2.

2.2.3 References and correct citation

Academic work always stacks on top of previous research, that's just how it works:

> "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants."
> (Newton to Hooke, 5 Feb. 1676; Corres I, 416)

Whenever your work depends directly or indirectly on other's work, you need to introduce a REFERENCE. Failure to do so, intendedly or unintendedly, is **always** taken to be an attempt to pass the work of others off as your own. This is called PLAGIARISM. In the Netherlands, two recent scandals (Stapel and Nijkamp) have put everyone in high alert. In attachment to these notes, you find a copy of the document "Fraude en plagiaat regeling studenten UvA" in which the university specifies its policy on the issue.

When do you insert a reference? After a QUOTATION or a paraphrase. We have already discussed paraphrasing. You quote when you take a fragment of somebody's work and you incorporate it in your text by using quotation marks. When you quote, you need to include exact details such as the page or chapter from which the fragment comes. For instance,

> In his report *Intelligent machinery*, Turing investigated "the question of whether or not it is possible for machinery to show intelligent behaviour". (Turing 1948, p. 418)

A similar indication would be needed in a paraphrase. "Cf." (an abbreviation for the Latin word confer) is used to indicate that a source is relevant but that you are not directly quoting it:

> In his report *Intelligent machinery*, Turing considered options in favour and against the possibility that machines may show intelligent behaviour. (Cf. Turing 1948, p. 418)

In the *References* section of the essay or paper, an entry such as this one should be included:

> Turing, Alan (1948), "Machine Intelligence", in Copeland, B. Jack, *The Essential Turing: The ideas that gave birth to the computer age*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

There exist different conventions or referencing systems. For instance, after the quotation or paraphrase, we could have used "[1], p. 418" if the bibliographical references are numbered and there Turing appears in place number 1. Likewise, the complete blibliographical details in the *References* section may look slightly different (e.g., A. Turing 1948, Machine Intelligence, in J. B. Copeland 2004, The Essential Turing: The ideas that gave birth to the computer age, Oxford University Press, Oxford). Likewise, one may choose to put all references for quotes and paraphrases in footnotes rather than in parenthetical additions. Some widely use systems are:

- The Harvard System (http://www.uefap.com/writing/referenc/harvard.pdf)
- Chicago System (http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html)
- American Psychological Association (APA) (http://www.apastyle.org/)

It doesn't matter to us which system you choose. What matters is that you are *consistent* and always use the same format in your essay or paper.

3 References

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